

Church History - the Early Church Part 3 (100-312)

by David Guzik

The sermon explores the history of the Christian Empire, from the persecution of Christians to the Edict of Toleration and the conversion of Constantine, highlighting the significance of these events for the church.

Duration: 45:33

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Galatians 3:28, Galatians 4:9-11

Topics: "Early Church", "Persecution"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the early persecution of Christians and the potential threat it posed to the growth and influence of Christianity. However, two significant events in the early 4th century changed the course of Christianity. The first event, which is often overlooked, was an edict by Galerius that aimed to bring Christians back to the ancient Roman gods. The second event was the rise of Constantine, who initially sought to help settle theological disputes within the church but eventually became the most notable Christian figure and influenced the church to become more like a corporation.

Transcript

We're going into our third period of church history here. The first period we called the Apostolic Period, and that was basically 33 AD to, what was the round number we threw out? 100. The next period we talked about was the period of the Early Church, and that was 100 to about 313, 312, you could say.

Okay, so we talked about those. Now, third, we're going to consider, this is a big chunk, I know, we're going to consider what I'm going to call the Christian Empire, and we're going to date that from 312 to 1500, believe it or not, which is a pretty big chunk of time, right? We're talking about 1,200 years. And of course, how Christianity was in 1500 was very different than how it was in 312.

We're not talking about one period of time where it was uniform, not by any means. But there are some very important themes that take place during this time and things we want to investigate together. And so we're calling this period the Christian Empire.

I suppose we'll spend two or three weeks talking about the period of the Christian Empire, then it's on to the time period of the Reformation. Now, one of the great things that we want to talk about during this time, one of the most important trends or characteristics takes place at the beginning part of this period. At the

end of the 3rd century, by the way, when I say 3rd century, raise your hand if this is true, when I say 3rd century, how many of you think of the 300s? Am I just funny on that? I usually think of that, okay? It's not.

The 3rd century is the 200s. I have to always struggle to keep this clear in my mind. The 3rd century is the 200s, okay? The 4th century is the 300s.

So, at the end of the 3rd century and the beginning of the 4th century, it looked like Christianity might be doomed. I mean, you had had basically 300 years of Christian growth and expansion. During the end of this period, there were starting to be Christian churches built and buildings built.

After about 250 in the early 200s, 250 or so, Christians started being able to build their own churches, build their own places of worship. The gospel was spreading. What was it that happened at the end of the 200s and the beginning of the 300s that made this difference and sort of imperiled Christianity altogether? Well, basically, it was a new outbreak of vicious persecution.

Vicious persecution. This is a name that should live in infamy among Christians. Diocletian conducted some of the worst persecutions against the church ever.

Now, in fact, I've got something from an edict he made from the Edicts of Diocletian from Eusebius' history. Basically, what they did was they divided the Roman Empire between east and west. And so, they would have two different emperors, a western emperor and an eastern emperor.

So, when it says here at the beginning, Diocletian and Maximum, that's talking about east and west. They declared that the meetings of the Christians should be abolished. What does that mean? You can't go to church, right? Christians can't meet.

It was in the 19th year of the reign of Diocletian that imperial edicts were published everywhere commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and that the scriptures be destroyed by fire and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded and that they of Caesar's household, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom. Then it goes on to say, such was the first edict against us, but not long after, other decrees were issued commanding that all the rulers of the churches in every place be thrown into prison and afterwards, by every means, be compelled to sacrifice to the pagan gods. This was a severe persecution.

I'll tell you what else really began in this. One of the great things that they did in this was they took everybody, every Christian who had a government job. And again, the Roman government was huge.

I mean, think about it on the scale today of the United States government. Let's say they passed a law tomorrow that said, if you're a Christian, you've got to get out of the army and you've got to get out of the civil service. That's what this was like.

I mean, a huge blow against Christians everywhere. And it looked like, not that Christianity would be stamped out, but that Christianity would just be made irrelevant. At this time, you had a very steady progression of Christian growth and influence.

And there was a substantial number of Christians. Now, it looked like Christianity might be put into this place. But then, two very remarkable things happened in the early part of the 4th century.

The second thing a lot of you probably know about. How many of you have ever heard the name of Constantine? The first one is almost more important, but hardly anybody knows about it. The first one happened, I can give you the exact date, April 30th, 311.

This was the Edict of Toleration. This had to do with the Roman Emperor Galerius. Now, Galerius had been a great persecutor of the Church.

And what he... I mean, this was one of the guys who implemented and carried out the Diocletian Edicts. This guy was a dedicated, aggressive persecutor of the Church. Surprisingly, he issued the Edict of Toleration on his deathbed.

Now, he never admitted that he had been wrong before, but he declared that he admired the determination and the tenacity of Christians in the face of persecution. And he decided that for the good of the Empire, he would allow them to meet as long as they were orderly about it. He also asked Christians to pray to their God for the good of the Empire.

Now, this established the significant official toleration of Christianity in the Roman Empire. It's called the Edict of Toleration. Now, there were times, many seasons in the first 300 years of the Church, when Christians were tolerated, but not officially.

They were tolerated just because the officials decided that they weren't going to persecute them, right? So, it was one of these things where the officials could say, well, we decide we're not going to persecute you, but we could always change our mind. Now, they passed a law that said Christians can practice their religion. Let's take a look at this Edict of Toleration.

It's on this thing. It's very interesting. This is a rough translation of what Galerius wrote.

He said, Among our other regulations, for the permanent advantage of the public good, we have so far attempted to bring all things into conformity with the ancient laws and the public discipline of the Romans. Now, ancient law and public discipline, you know what that means? That means, give me that old time religion. But when Galerius speaks of that old time religion, what's he talking about? Zeus, Apollos, you know, all the ancient Roman gods.

He says at the end of that paragraph, It has especially been our goal that the Christians who had abandoned the religion of their forefathers should return to right opinions. Isn't it interesting to hear a pagan emperor speak about this in this way? Those Christians, they're abandoning that old time religion. The faith of their forefathers.

They need to get back to the basics here. And so we did the best we could, is what he's saying. Then he goes on.

We don't know why such stubbornness and foolishness took hold of the Christians. So that instead of honoring these ancient institutions, which perhaps their own ancestors established. You see, this is what Galerius is saying.

Man, your great great great grandpa probably established these religions and now you're abandoning them. Romans, in their pagan religions, were very big on ancestor worship. So this is an important point to him.

We don't know why such stubbornness and foolishness took hold of the Christians. So that instead of honoring those ancient institutions, which perhaps their own ancestors had established, they, through caprice, made laws to themselves and drew together into different societies, many men from widely different backgrounds. Can somebody translate for me? What is offensive to Galerius there? It's that whole principle in Galatians.

That in the church there's neither Jew, nor Greek, nor slave, nor free, nor barbarian, or civil, or whatever. It just doesn't matter. He goes, you know what they're doing among those Christians? They get together all these different people from all these different backgrounds and they bring them together in one society, in one club.

Why, it's an outrage. It's a scandal. Okay, he goes on.

Paragraph three. After the publication of our edict, now he means edicts of persecution, commanding Christians to observe the ancient institutions, many of them were persuaded through the fear of danger and many were exposed to punishment. You know what he's saying? He's saying, some abandoned Christianity and came our way, some didn't and were punished.

Now he says, apparently not very many of them did, otherwise paragraph four would be unnecessary. Nevertheless, because great numbers still persist in their opinions, and because we have understood that at the present day they neither pay reverence and do adoration to the gods, nor yet worship their own god, therefore we from our desired generosity in giving pardon to all, have judged fit to extend our generosity to those men and to permit them again to be Christians and to establish the places of their religious assemblies so that they, yet so as they offend not against good order. Now, isn't it interesting how he says, we haven't been able to, basically what he's saying is, we haven't been able to make them pagans and we haven't allowed them to be Christians.

So now, because we're so generous, because we're so nice, we're going to allow them to be Christians just so as long as they don't get out of hand in their orders, in their assemblies. And of course that was a big problem, right? There was always a riot breaking out whenever a church service got together, right? No, I'm being sarcastic. It's almost funny that he says against the public order, but you know, Christians were the best friends the empire ever had.

And then he mentions that, kind of here at the end, he goes, wherefore, it will be the duty of Christians in return for our toleration, in other words, because we're being so nice to you, to pray to God for our benefit and for the public good and for their own good, that the public good may continue safe in every place and that they may, they themselves may live securely in their homes. Did this guy become a Christian? No. An absolute shock and surprise that this guy on his deathbed issues, this man who had been a lifelong, aggressive persecutor of the church, now changes his mind.

And you know what basically changed his mind? The Christians wouldn't quit. He couldn't change him. I mean, he tried the best he could.

But when they kept being thrown to the lions, when they kept being burned at the stake, when they kept being beheaded at the chopping block and more and more people became Christians and the Christians weren't being scared away and they were strong in their faith, you know what? He said, I can't win. Most of these Roman emperors, Galerius is probably a good example. The reason he persecuted Christians was he thought it was politically important for him to do it.

Now, this is what's kind of interesting about this, is that at the end of his life, when he saw that Christians weren't backing down, he realized, this is doing more harm than good. So, it was politically smart for him to issue this edict of toleration. So, that's the first very big thing that happened.

I mean, now, Christians are officially tolerated to practice their faith in the Roman Empire. A huge change. Huge change.

Let's say you're a Christian in those days and you have never been thrown in jail for being a Christian. No one in your family ever has. But you know some people who have had.

And your pastor has served some jail time. And so there's this climate of fear around everything. All the time.

You have to meet secretly. You are very, very careful about who you share the gospel with. Right? You know, I mean, that could get you into a lot of trouble.

And so here you are doing your thing, and all of a sudden, you read this edict. This emperor who has been persecuting you issues this edict of toleration. What are you thinking? God has answered our prayers.

I mean, is there anything that any Christian would think would be negative in that edict of toleration? No, not a thing. All right, well, what's the next thing? Number two, the conversion of Constantine. Now, the whole dynamic of political structure in the ancient Roman Empire is really complex.

I mean, really complex. Let me just kind of make it too simple. I mean, I'm sacrificing some accuracy for the sake of simplicity.

But in October of 312, so what are we talking about? We're talking about a year and a half after the edict of toleration. In October of 312, the imperial throne of Rome was up for grabs. And a young Roman general named Constantine commanded all the armies of Britain and Gaul.

What do we call Gaul today? France. There were substantial Roman armies in Britain and in France. Constantine was the commander, was the general over all those armies.

His armies supported him to be the next emperor of Rome. You know how in these Latin American countries where, you know, a ruler dies and it's basically the army that decides who's going to be the next president or whatever? That's how it was in the Roman Empire, right? You had the army, you had the power, you had the right to be the next emperor of Rome. Whenever it wasn't clear already who was going to be.

So it was up for grabs, Constantine's armies said, this is our man, he's going to be the next guy. Now, obviously this was contested. There was another guy named Maxentius who was another claimant to the throne.

And Constantine marched with his armies from the north and really right outside of Rome he met up with the armies of his opponent. A couple days before the battle, he's there meeting up with his opponent and he saw a cross of light in the sky. And he either read it written in the sky or he heard it.

But he heard this in Latin. *In hoc signus vincis*. Which means, in this sign conquer.

He was already beginning to reject the Roman idea of multiple gods in favor of one god. And when he saw this in the sky, he regarded it as a very important sign. Now, a little bit later, still before he was going to meet this other army in battle, he had a dream.

And in his dream, Jesus appeared to him and showed him the cross sign again. Except this time, the cross looked a little different. The cross is bent over like that.

Now, what this kind of looks like is it kind of looks like the Greek letters chi and rho. Which are the first two letters of Christos. Those are the first two letters of the name for Christ.

And so he regarded this as a sign. By the way, does that look familiar? That is a very prominent Roman Catholic symbol. In a real sense, this is the beginning of the Roman Catholic Church.

This is Constantine's cross. He felt Jesus was telling him to put this sign on his soldier's shield and to go out and fight the battle. Well, he did that, he went out, they fought the battle, and he won.

And so Constantine came into power. When he came into power, he moved to grant freedom and official status to Christians. And in the year 313, he granted the Edict of Milan.

That granted official religious freedom in the Roman Empire. The Edict declared, our purpose is to grant both to the Christians and to all others full authority to follow whatever worship each man has desired. Matter of fact, let's take a look at that.

We'll read that. Now, what's interesting about this is religious toleration is different than religious freedom. Right? And this is what this was granting, religious freedom.

This is interesting to read, these old documents. Again, this is from the Edict of Milan. This isn't the entire thing, but it's from it.

It says, It seemed to us that among those things that are good for mankind in general, the reverence paid to the divinity deserved our first and chief attention and that it was proper that the Christians and all others should have liberty to follow that mode of religion which to each of them appeared best. So that that God who is seated in heaven might be kind and helpful to us and to everyone under our government. And therefore, we judged it a good measure and one consistent with good judgment that no man should be denied the right to practice the rights of the Christians or whatever other religion his mind has directed him.

That thus the supreme divinity to whose worship we freely devote ourselves might continue to extend his favor and goodness to us. And accordingly, we give you to know that without regard to any provisos in our former order concerning the Christians, what was the former order? To persecute. Now, when he says our, he's not talking about himself personally, he's talking about the Roman emperors.

All who chose that religion are to be permitted freely and absolutely to remain in it and not to be disturbed in any way or molested. And we thought it fit to be thus special in the things committed to your charge. That you might understand that the indulgence which you've granted in matters of religion to the Christians is ample and unconditional.

And perceive at the same time that the open and free exercise of their respective religions is granted to all others as well as to the Christians for it befits the well-ordered state and tranquility of our times that each

individual be allowed according to his own choice to worship the divinity and we mean not to take away from the honor due to any religion or those it honors. Moreover, with respect to the Christians, we formerly gave certain orders concerning the place appropriated for the religious assemblies. In other words, burn them down.

That was the former order. But now we declare that all persons who have purchased some places either from our treasury or from anyone else must restore them to the Christians without demanding repayment of kind and that this be performed immediately and without dispute. And that the spirit of our gracious order may be known unto you all we declare that you cause it by your authority to be published everywhere.

Pretty impressive, right? This isn't just saying we're going to tolerate the Christians. What this says is hey, whatever we've done in persecution we're going to try to make it right. That's right.

We're going to restore it. We're going to give it back. And so this was very, very big.

Constantine did what he could do to help the church. He sought to restore well, first of all, I would say the idea of religious liberty did not begin in America. This is a very modern idea that Constantine brings forth.

The idea that hey, every man should be able to practice his own religion according to his own conscience. Go ahead, he says. That's a very modern idea.

Now what's sad is that after Constantine it fell back pretty quickly from there. The idea of religious liberty, religious freedom. But Constantine declared this hey, let every man worship his own God according to the dictates of his own conscience.

That's fine, he says. Because now, we realize we did a wrong thing against the Christians. We're going to restore that the best we can.

The next thing that he did was he goes out and he says that we're going to start paying government salaries to bishops and to preachers. Pastors, basically. Now again, remember how this worked.

Here's a city. Let's say this is the city of Rome. Rome is a big, big city, isn't it? How many Christian congregations are there in Rome? A bunch.

Where do they meet? Well, by this time there are some churches. But they also meet in houses. Right? So there's a lot of Christian congregations.

Every congregation has a pastor or a leader or a preacher who leads it. But then there's one bishop who has oversight over the whole enchilada. Now, what Constantine said is we're going to start paying the salary for some of these bishops and some of these preachers.

The government was. And then he says, also, that we're going to recognize Sunday as a governmental day of rest. And then finally, what he said was, Constantine said, look, whenever there's a problem in the church and I can help out, let me help.

You've got a controversy, you've got a problem, you've got something that's going to divide the church, let me help out. I'll do what I can to help. Good thing or bad thing? Put yourself in the place of a Christian.

You've been persecuted. People you know have died for their faith. You have seen people die for their faith in Jesus Christ.

Your own family, nobody ever was killed or hurt, but your dad lost his job and your whole family was thrown into poverty. You wanted to get into a good school, but they wouldn't let you because you were a Christian. I mean, all this kind of persecution, and then now, first, you were ecstatic when the edict of toleration came out.

Yes. Now, the emperor himself is a Christian. Thank you, Lord.

If you put yourself in the shoes of somebody back then, it is impossible to see this as anything other than just thank you, Jesus. This is the best. Lord, you are so good.

I can't believe how you did this, Lord. All of this is the best. Now, you see how they're picturing that? Was Constantine a true Christian? This is one of the real controversies of church history.

It's warmly debated. The effect of the official recognition and the support of the church by the Roman Empire, it ended up being a negative influence. This is what one writer says, a guy named Houghton.

He says, It is very doubtful whether Constantine was ever a true convert. His predecessors had persecuted the Christians for political reasons. He favored them on similar grounds and showed himself willing to continue the policy of toleration, which had, in fact, been introduced about a year before he won his victory.

This guy says, Look, he's just a politician playing the Christian card. He's just carrying on what Galerius started on his deathbed, right? But you know what? I don't agree with that. I have to say, I believe that Constantine was a genuine Christian.

I don't think he would have done many of the things that he did unless he was a genuine Christian. Especially getting involved in church controversies. Now, let me point out a couple of this.

There were two pretty important church controversies that Constantine got involved in. One of them was the Donatus Controversy. The Donatus Controversy started in North Africa where there was a big population of Romans and Christians, of course.

The Donatus were a strict group of Christians in North Africa who refused to recognize a man as a bishop. A man was appointed as bishop. They refused to recognize the man as bishop because he was ordained by somebody who faltered under persecution.

Now, remember I talked about it last week, the laid hands on, who laid hands on, who laid hands on, who laid hands on whole theory? Well, what the Donatus said was, no, there's a break in that chain. And this man who ordained this man fell away, so we don't recognize this guy's ordination. And this was a big split in the church.

Constantine said, let's call a conference, let's get together, let's do this. I'll call together a great big convention where we'll get together and decide this issue and we'll go through it that way. Constantine did that.

Constantine, let me help. I don't think Constantine would have done that unless he was a real Christian. I mean, he really wanted to help.

The other big thing that he got involved in was the Arian Controversy. This was interesting and we're going to get into that a little bit more. The Arian Controversy started in the silly city of Alexandria.

In Alexandria there was a bishop known as Alexander. Alexander was fine. He believed biblical doctrine, no problem.

But he had an elder in his church whose name was Arius. And Arius had a problem. Arius believed that Jesus was not equal to God the Father.

That Jesus himself was a created being and therefore he was inferior to God the Father. That's what Arius believed. Well, what do you think Alexander did with him? He booted him.

You can't have a guy like that. I mean, this was a guy who was an influential guy. I mean, it would be like in our church if one of the elders in our church started teaching something like this.

I mean, obviously he didn't boot him at the first thing. He sat down, tried to persuade him, work with him, all this stuff. But when all of a sudden, at the end of the thing, this elder says, No, Jesus Christ is not God.

Then we say, Mister, there's the door. You're no longer part of this church. We're not having anybody in leadership or who's going to be vocal and going around and promoting this false doctrine.

Period. You're gone. The problem was Arius started a movement and got a lot of people to follow him.

Constantine dealt with this issue that was really spreading around the empire. And he said, Let's have a convention. Let's get a convention together and discuss this issue.

I don't think Constantine would have done those things if he wasn't a Christian. Now, let me tell you why else I think Constantine was a Christian. He said he was.

Number two, other Christians in his day thought he was. And you know one of the big reasons people think that he probably wasn't a Christian? Was because he died in the year 337. He did not receive baptism until he was on his deathbed.

A lot of people would say that shows a man who's an insincere convert, right? If he was really sold out to Jesus Christ he would have received baptism a long time before. You know what? No, not necessarily. You've got to understand the way people thought in that day.

Remember I was talking about last week or the week before how they had this thinking where once you were saved if you sinned significantly after that you're out. Forget it. There's no possibility to repent.

I mean this is what they thought. A lot of people believed this. Well, for a lot of people the whole idea was after you were baptized if you committed a mortal sin after baptism there was no hope for salvation.

None at all. None. You're going to hell.

Straight to hell. Forget it. There's no point in even asking for forgiveness.

Little sins, fine. A mortal sin, forget it. After you're baptized.

So, if you believe that wouldn't it make sense for you to be baptized on your deathbed? Right? I mean, and that's how people thought. A lot of people were baptized on their deathbed. So, I believe that

Constantine was a Christian.

I believe that all in all Constantine was a here's our word all in all Constantine was a good man. But I talked about this last week Some of the greatest damage in the church has been done by good men. Not because they did good things.

But because when a good man goes off on a wrong course it's all the more dangerous. All the more dangerous. Because people will follow him and respect him because he's a good man.

That's what happened with Constantine. I believe that every intention of Constantine's heart was good. But the guy was misguided.

And he set in motion something in the church that lasted not until 1500 beyond 1500 it lasted. But Constantine forever forever changed the church. And it's important to understand that for the Christians who saw this rapid change it seemed to be nothing but positive.

Nothing but positive. Are you trying to say that it's a negative thing that the Roman emperor is now a Christian? And that he wants to help Christians? And that they're not killing us anymore? And that they want to help us instead? How can anybody say that that's a bad thing? You know, it's easy for us now we stand back, well, you know, they shouldn't have gone off on that way. You need to understand that if you were living in the times this would have been a very difficult thing to see the dangers of this.

So, they would have seen it as nothing but positive. They would have believed that God had changed the hearts of not one, but two Roman emperors. One to grant the issue of the Edict of Toleration and the other one to grant the Edict of Milan.

In an amazingly short time the church was in a completely different environment. From persecuted to privileged. Persecuted to privileged.

Now look, let's get the idea here. Who took care of the persecution? This was Galerius, right? The Edict of Toleration wiped out persecution. But it was Constantine who made the church privileged.

So, man, this is really something. To go in such a short time from terribly persecuted to privileged made all the difference. For centuries the church had been a counterculture movement.

Now it had to deal with the problems of power in a completely different way. The people who wanted to get along with society, to go along with the flow, to go along with how things were, to get ahead in this world, the people who wanted to do that before they didn't want anything to do with Christianity, right? Now they did. Because now Christianity is privileged.

Now, when Constantine is looking to promote a man in the army, who does he look for? A Christian. When Constantine is looking for a new governor or sub-governor or prelate or some kind of magistrate who does he look for? He looks for a Christian. It doesn't take people very long to figure that stuff out, do they? And so how do you think people talk around Constantine? They use all their foul language outside.

As soon as they walk in it's, Oh, blessed Constantine! Praise Jesus! Isn't God good? And so many people became Christians just because that was the way to get along. But also something else changed. When you go from persecuted to privileged, all of a sudden now you have a lot of prestige and pomp and money and status that you didn't have before.

Now you start seeing the elaborate costumes for the church people. The elaborate churches. The elaborate crosses and processions and the gold and the silver and all this stuff.

Because now they can do it. Does a persecuted church do things like that? No way! That's the last thing on their mind. Oh, we have to have a gold mantelpiece for the altar.

You know what? A persecuted church thinking about that? That's just another thing for the soldiers to rip off when they come here and case the joint. But now everything changes. Now, Constantine's help in doctrinal matters also complicated things tremendously.

Because I talked about these things, the Donatists and the Arians. Probably some of you have heard of the Arian controversy before. In some ways, the Donatist controversy is a lot more interesting in its fundamental principle with what it deals with.

I mean, what makes ordination and the things of God powerful? Is it the person doing it or is it the spirit of God behind it? And it's a very interesting controversy. You ever turn on the television and see these guys who are just wackos and yet in some way it seems God uses them? You say, what's going on with that? Well, you know what? That deals with issues all around the Donatist controversy. Constantine comes in and says, let me help you settle these issues, okay? Let me help out.

I want to help. I want to help. Great.

Thank you, Constantine. You want to help. You know what the problem is then? An official government position on the Donatist controversy.

An official government position on the Arian controversy. And you know what? For the most part, Constantine had the right opinions on these things. Praise God.

But it's not long until you don't have the right opinion on those things, is it? The church started to become much more like a corporation. And the emperor of Rome was the CEO of the corporation. Suddenly, who is the most notable Christian? Constantine.

An emperor. You know? Not the bishop of your city. Not, you know, the Billy Graham of that day.

Not, you know, whatever you want to say. Suddenly it's Constantine. Tricky, tricky issues.

One other thing here. The Roman emperors were always recognized as religious leaders. And they were given a title in the pagan days.

This was a title relating to their religious leadership. The Roman emperors. Pontifex Maximus.

Anybody know what that means? Maximus, you can figure out what it means, right? Great. Big, right? Pontifex is literally a bridge builder. You know how it was used in thinking? Priest.

Basically, it's a way of saying great priest or high priest. By the way, this is a title that the Roman popes carry to this day. You ever hear the pope referred to as the pontiff? The pontiff.

That comes from Pontifex Maximus. Let me just go on the Arian controversy for a minute here. In the Arian controversy, Constantine seemed to go on the right side.

He seemed to, you know, he called together a very important church council that we'll talk about in a week or two, the Council of Nicaea. You know, Constantine did the right things. But when Constantine died, his empire was divided among his sons.

And one of his sons turned out basically to be an Arian. And he supported the Arians in the next controversy. So now suddenly the official government position is unbiblical.

And he forced an unbiblical creed upon many of the bishops. And when the bishops appealed to the longstanding teachings of the church, which are known as canons, basically when the bishops said, listen, dude, Mr. Emperor, that's not what the Bible teaches. I'm sorry, we can't teach.

You know what he said? He said, whatever I want shall be regarded as the canons. Either obey or go into exile. Now, just one generation after Constantine, his sons are now promoting heresy as the official government position.

And you know what's interesting about this? Even in this whole business with Constantine's son, church leaders at first did not challenge the right of the Roman Emperor to weigh in on this doctrinally. You know how annoying it is today when movie stars come up and declare political positions? Who cares? I can't think of a more worthless piece of information in the world. That's how it should be when politicians start talking about religion in that sense, right? When they start giving their decisions, when they want to take sides in a controversy, it's like, dude, who cares? You're free to have your opinion.

Great, God bless you. Let's leave this up to the people to whom this is their business, right? You do your thing and leave this up to the people who have a business doing it. Well, that's how it should have been with the Emperor, right? Shouldn't somebody have been standing up to Constantine's son and saying, look, not only are you wrong, but far more than being wrong, we don't care.

You have no right to even speak on this matter. So just get out of here. Even if you were right, you don't have a right to speak on this matter.

Now, this is the problem. When the governmental power was right, when it was correct, they gave it the right to speak on these matters. Now, when it's incorrect, they still have the right to speak on it.

Dangerous, dangerous thing. Well, one guy that we'll probably talk about next week named Athanasius, he sort of woke up and smelled the coffee and said, wait a minute, we got to let these Emperors know they don't even have a place speaking to us about this. And so we'll talk about that a little bit.

Okay, two more interesting things. First of all, Constantine's mother. Her name was Helena.

And I don't know if she became a Christian before or after Constantine, to tell you the truth. But Helena has a very kind of important place in Christian history. Because she felt that God wanted her to go back to the Holy Land and find all the places where things happened.

So today when you go to the Holy Land and see the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, all the traditional sites, Bethlehem, Helena, Constantine's mother, was the one who went back and said, this is the place, this is the place. Sometimes she had good reason to believe that it was there, sometimes not. Sometimes she just declared it.

For example, she found Jesus' tomb. When she went to Jerusalem, this is what she found. I mean, pretty amazing, right? She found Jesus' tomb, she found the three crosses, and she found Pilate's inscription written where it had been.

Anybody believe that? No. She didn't find it. This is 300 years after the fact.

400 years. No. 300 years after the fact.

She didn't find any of those things. And so what did they do? They had three... You know what it was. The locals heard that she was coming and she's looking for the cross.

You want a cross? We'll give you a cross. Here's three of them. Here's three.

So which one was the true one? They said that they had a sick woman touch each one of the crosses, and the one that she touched and got healed from, that was the true cross. So what did Helena do with the cross? Well, part of it was set in silver and was supposed to be kept in Jerusalem. The nails were still in the cross, and so she... The nails were still in the cross.

So she pulled the nails out of the cross, and one of them was attached to the emperor's battle helmet, right? Good place to have something of such important significance there. The other was attached to the bridle of his horse. And then over the years, thousands of little slivers of wood set in churches and monasteries all over were said to be pieces of the true cross recovered from Helena.

Actually, it says that the true cross was buried and Helena supposedly elevated it out of the ground, you know, through prayer or whatever. Martin Luther said that by his day in 1500, he said that in his day, if you were to get together and assemble all the pieces of the true cross that were around in Europe, you'd have enough to build a ship, he said. Because it's just superstition.

So Helena was important. What's interesting is the legacy after Constantine. As is so often the case, you know, Constantine was largely a good man with bad ideas.

I think his sons you couldn't be so charitable about. Galerius said the church isn't going to be persecuted anymore, right? Constantine said the church was going to be privileged. Constantine's sons said the church was going to be exclusive.

They started shutting down the pagan temples and executing people who sacrificed to the pagan gods. Big step, right? Now, all of a sudden, we're not in a place of toleration of religions anymore, right? How many think people got saved after that? Saved after that, right? Yeah, sure, I'm a Christian. Of course I'm a Christian.

I don't want to get my head chopped off. They started using the sword to promote Christianity. And what's interesting about this is first they had Constantine's sons, and then when they passed from the scene, Constantine had a nephew named Julian.

Julian was interesting because he barely escaped a family massacre that was meant to wipe out all of his brothers and such. And he went off to school, and then eventually he was able to come up and be emperor. When he came up and became emperor, he showed his true colors.

He said, I'm not a Christian at all. I'm a pagan. And we're going to go back to that old time religion is what he basically said.

And he tried to do what he could to beat back down Christianity and to exalt again the pagan religions. He didn't get very far because he didn't reign very long. He went out in battle and was killed just about two years into his reign.

And it's said that this man who was so hostile to Christianity, this is like the last gasp of paganism in the empire. It's said that he was dead, lying on the field of battle and bleeding to death. He dipped his hand in his own blood and flung his blood up to heaven and cried out, You have conquered, O Galilean.

Saying, Jesus, you beat me. Here I am, dead, lying on the field of battle. Because even though he intended to restore paganism, he didn't reign long enough to really do anything.

The emperors who followed Julian were sympathetic to Christianity and generally followed the trend of opposing the pagan religions and involving themselves in the disputes of the church. We'll pick it up with more next time. Very interesting period in church history.

We'll talk more about what it was like to be a Christian during this era and some notable Christian writers and thinkers. And we'll also get into some great councils and events. Interesting stuff for next week.

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