

Church History, Lesson 5

(This lesson is based on The Story of Christianity by Justo L. Gonzalez.)

The Great Persecution

- Diocletian
 - After the persecution of Decius, the church experienced relative peace and safety.
 - Diocletian became Emperor in 284 AD and reigned until 305 AD.
 - He reorganized the Empire and brought renewed prosperity.
 - His reorganization included setting up 4 "Emperors". An Augustus in both the East and the West with a Caesar underneath each Augustus. He designed this system to deal with the issue of imperial succession and the continual civil wars that resulted from various leaders and generals fighting for the imperial throne.
 - Diocletian himself ruled in the east with Galerius under him. And Maximian ruled the west with Constantius under him.
- Among these 4 Emperors, only Galerius seemed to have any antipathy for Christians. On top of that, Diocletian's wife and daughter were Christians. There were also some high ranking officials in the government who were Christians.
- Around 295 AD several Christians were condemned to death, some because they refused to join the army and others for trying to leave it.
- Galerius was concerned that at some point any Christians in the army may decide not to obey orders. He convinced Diocletian to expel all Christians from the army. Apparently, some commanders tried to get their Christian soldiers to deny their faith and executed those who would not.
- In 303 AD Galerius convinced Diocletian to remove all Christians from government positions and to issue an edict that all Christian buildings and books be destroyed. Those Christians who would not turn over their sacred writings were tortured and / or condemned to death.
- Then 2 different fires broke out in the imperial palace. Galerius accused the Christians of setting the fires in revenge for having their churches and books burned. Diocletian then decreed that all Christians in the imperial court had to sacrifice to the gods. His wife and daughter immediately complied with the edict, however the "Grand Chamberlain" Dorotheus was martyred during this time.
- Then, persecution broke out all over the Empire as local governors followed Diocletian's example and torched Christian churches and books. They also put many believers to death.
- Then Christians were blamed for various disturbances around the Empire, so Diocletian declared that all Christian leaders be arrested and then that all Christians sacrifice to the gods.
- This unleashed the worse persecution of Christians up until that point.
 - Many Christians succumbed and offered sacrifices to the gods.
 - Some were able to hide.
 - Some fled the persecution and settled in Persia.
- Starting in 304 AD political turmoil reigned because Diocletian became sick and then abdicated. Galerius became the primary "Augustus". However, this turmoil did not remove the threat of persecution as it had before. The persecution continued in the east, but not as much in the west.
- During this time, Constantine (son of Constantius) escaped from captivity in Galerius' court and returned to his father's troops. When Constantius died the troops declared Constantine their "augustus".
- Maximinus Daia, one of the 4 emperors, had Christians put to work as slaves in the stone quarries. But then, the Christians organized churches in their places of captivity and slavery. Maximinus then either deported or killed them. The list of martyrs became longer and longer.

Final Victory

- Finally... Galerius became sick with a very painful disease. He apparently became convinced by those Christians who claimed that God was punishing him for persecuting Christians and changed his policy. In his edict, Galerius said that Christians were to be pardoned and allowed to “be Christians once again” as long as they didn’t interfere with the public order. The edict also included this requirement:
“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 and they may live in peace.”
- This edict ended the worst persecution that Christians had to suffer from the Roman Empire. 5 days later, Galerius died.
- Constantine had been consolidating power and strengthening his troops in Britain and Gaul for a long time. In the turmoil that followed Galerius’ death he marched on Rome. He commanded his troops to paint a Christian symbol on their shields.
- Constantine conquered Maxentius and then made peace with the other Emperor, Licinius, at Milan in 313 AD. Part of the Edict of Milan included the agreement that persecution would stop, so 313 is the date normally given to the ending of Roman persecution of Christians.

Constantine’s influence...

- The big question at this point in the story of Christian is how those who claim to follow a simple carpenter who Himself was persecuted and martyred would respond to being ushered suddenly into the halls of power...
- The results of Constantine’s “conversion” have had repercussions until the present day. This is the beginning of “Christendom”.
- In 322 AD Constantine invaded Licinius’ territories on the pretext of pursuing a band of barbarians. Licinius interpreted this as an intentional provocation and prepared for war. Constantine was victorious in 324 and ruled the entire Empire for another 13 years until his death. This was a time of peace and rebuilding.
- Unlike previous emperors, Constantine decided that the empire could best be rebuilt and unified on the basis of Christianity instead of the basis of a return to paganism. So this time, the desire to unify the empire elevated Christians and Christianity instead of persecuting it.
- **Constantine’s “Conversion”...**
 - Constantine was not actually baptized until his deathbed.
 - And he continued to participate in and lead pagan rites as the “high priest” of the Roman Empire.
 - However, after his victories over Maxemius and Licinius he immediately ended any residual persecution of the church.
 - He then began “gifting” property to the church such as the Laterine palace in Rome.
 - He also appointed various Christians to high positions in the government.
 - In 324 AD Constantine ordered that all soldiers worship the “Supreme God” on the first day of the week.
 - He also decreased the influence of the old Roman aristocracy who were all primarily pagan by moving the capital of the Empire to Constantinople.
- All of this newfound peace and prominence influenced the church dramatically.
 - Christian worship began to include formal, luxurious garments.
 - Christian worship began to include physical gestures that would have normally been a show or reverence for the emperor.
 - And Christian worship began to include such things as incense, processions, and relics of the martyrs.
 - And Christian churches became much more ornate and luxurious.