

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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The Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 legalized Christianity. Toleration of this new faith in Rome was not a gradual development. It happened suddenly, right after some of the most brutal persecutions of Christians. Soon, Roman officials were kissing the broken hands of Christian confessors whom they had tortured. Quickly, paganism faded as the official religion of the Roman Empire, only to be replaced by the Christian church. Christianity, once despised and persecuted, emerged from the catacombs in triumph. Whereupon its problems really began.

Constantine

The emperor Diocletian, who initiated the most violent and systematic persecutions of Christians, ruled as part of a *tetrarchy*, in which he shared power with three others: Galerius in central Europe; Maximian in Italy and Africa; and Constantine Chlorus in Gaul and Britain. Constantine Chlorus refused to attack the Christians in his jurisdiction, but the others were fanatical in their resolution to eradicate the new religion with unprecedented cruelty, destroying churches and Bibles, imprisoning the clergy, and putting to death all who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods.

Before the battle against his last rival, Constantine, the son of Constantine Chlorus, had a dream. He saw a cross with the words: "In this sign, conquer." Constantine replaced the Roman eagle with crosses, carried as standards and painted on his soldiers' shields. On October 27, 312, at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome, Constantine did conquer under the sign of the cross, and the new Emperor gave the credit to the Christian God. In January of the new year, he issued the Edict of Milan, which proclaimed that subjects of Rome could follow any religion they chose. The decree also officially recognized Christianity and provided that churches and individual Christians who lost property in the persecutions would be reimbursed from the imperial treasury. Though the decree guaranteed freedom of religion for pagans as well, Constantine favored the church, which soon displaced the old religion in influence and in power. And the Emperor exercised leadership in the church, appointing bishops, calling the Council of Nicaea, and making himself, in effect, the head of the church. But was Constantine a Christian? Apparently not until his deathbed, when he was finally baptized. On the occasion, he said, "Now let us put away all duplicity." He was one of the most gifted of Rome's emperors, and he shared their ruthlessness, at one time putting to death his own son. He continued to honor Roman gods even as he came to appreciate the greater power of Jesus Christ. His mother Helena was a devout believer, though it is unclear whether she came to the faith before or after her son's ascendancy, but he himself was always theologically confused. Though he called the Council of Nicaea, he came under the influence of the Arians. In fact, he was baptized by an Arian bishop. Upon his death, the Roman Senate honored him as they had done other effective emperors, voting to deify him. But thanks to Constantine, the church rose out of the underground, influencing the culture for the good, flourishing intellectually, and establishing what would become the foundations of Christendom. But at a cost.

Constantinian Christianity

With the legalization of the church, Christianity under Constantine began to exert a positive moral influence upon a Rome that had become decadent. Though today's feminists claim that Christianity is oppressive, with many glorifying an imagined pagan past that worshiped goddesses, the fact is, women were terribly oppressed and misused under paganism, and it was Christianity that liberated them. Constantine, under the influence of the church, passed laws allowing women to control property and protecting them from rape. Mothers were given rights over their children that formerly were given only to the fathers. Marriage was protected, with new laws restricting divorce and punishing adultery. Infanticide — the classical practice of "exposing" unwanted babies — was forbidden as one of the greatest crimes. The bloody spectator sport of watching gladiators kill each other was halted. Provision was made to care for widows and orphans, the sick and the poor.

But not only did the church begin to influence the culture; the culture began to influence the church. Under Diocletian, there were no nominal believers, no one who joined the church except out of the deepest conviction, since confessing Christ was punishable by death. But once Christianity became politically-correct and culturally-fashionable — indeed, a means of advancing in the Emperor's favor — joining the church lost its edge. People embraced Christianity without necessarily understanding its teachings or having true faith in Christ, bringing with them into the church their pagan worldviews.

Under Constantine and his successors, the Christian church as an institution rushed into the vacuum of the pagan temples. Under the old regime, priests were exempt from taxation, a privilege extended to the Christian clergy, whereupon many Romans entered the ministry for other than religious reasons. The state gave its wealth to the pagan temples, so now government money flowed to the church, with all of the temptations and complacency and materialism that great wealth can bring. Christian priests replaced pagan priests as official advisors and prognosticators, sanctioning the imperial court with prayers and ceremonies as the pagan priests did with their sacrifices. The church also became politicized, with the emperor exerting his will in matters of church government.

The alliance between church and state was such that heretics could now not just be excommunicated, but punished by the civil authority. As the distinction blurred between the church and the world, the church became worldly.

Not that the church necessarily and in all cases followed the Emperor blindly or fully succumbed to the culture. Although Constantine summoned the Council of Nicaea in an effort to unify the church from the multitudinous heresies that came to the surface after Christianity was legalized, and although he, at first, helped to enforce its teachings about the Trinity, soon after, he himself fell under the influence of the Arians, who denied the full deity of Christ. It was Constantine who banished Athanasius, the theologian who, it is said, stood against the world to confess Christ's divinity.

When Rome finally fell, the church was the only institution left standing. When the barbarians, many of whom were Arian Christians, stopped their plundering, and the dust of the Dark Ages settled, the new civilization of the Middle Ages came into being. There was corruption when the state ruled the church, but it became even worse when the church ruled the state. The medieval church took on the trappings, the hierarchies, and the authoritarianism of imperial Rome. On the authority of a forged document, called "the Donation of Constantine," purporting to be a grant from the Emperor giving the pope temporal rule, the Medieval papacy claimed earthly, as well as spiritual, authority. This created a tyranny that was absolute and complete, to the point that the Reformers championed the authority of "secular" rulers over and against the church hierarchy.

The Paradox

It was surely a good thing that Christianity was legalized, that believers need no longer fear for their lives, that the church could play its part in shaping civilization. The problem with the Edict of Milan and its aftermath is that the spheres of earthly government and spiritual nurture became confused with each other. The church became like the government, in its exercise of power, and the government became like a church, in claiming divine status for itself. This prevented both the church and the state from functioning in the way that God designed them.

The Bible, in Romans 13 and elsewhere, makes clear that emperors and other earthly authorities are indeed sanctioned and used by God to keep order in a sinful world. The state and the culture are subject to God's moral law, which restrains evil and promotes justice even among non-believers. The accomplishments of civilization are good things, to be seen as blessings of God.

The church, though, is a kingdom not of this world. It works not by coercive power but by the Word of God. The Holy Spirit calls people into faith, delivering them from the realm of the Law into the grace and forgiveness of the Gospel. This faith cannot be coerced. The church is focused above all on eternity, and its mission is to bring salvation. It must not become preoccupied with its own glory; rather, it lives under the cross of its crucified and risen Lord.

Christians are to be in the world, but not of the world, positively living out their faith in their various vocations in the "secular" realm and influencing it for good, while remembering that their ultimate citizenship is in heaven.

One of the great paradoxes in Christian history is that the church is most pure in times of cultural hostility. When things are easy and times are good, that is when the church most often goes astray. When Christianity seems identical with the culture and even when the church seems to be enjoying its greatest earthly success, then it is weakest.

Conversely, when the church encounters hardship, persecution, and suffering — think of the Reformation Christians under the Inquisition, the underground church under the Nazis and the Communists, and the secret house churches in Islamic countries today — then it is closest to its crucified Lord, then there are fewer hypocrites and nominal believers among its members, and then the faith of Christians burns most intensely.

Today, though culturally-conforming churches remain, the age of Constantinian Christianity has just about played its way out. We are entering a new age of cultural hostility to true Christianity. And, paradoxically, that is good news for the church. One would think that it would be an obstacle to church growth when joining the church meant a death sentence. And yet, the age of persecution was the greatest period of church growth in history.

This new cultural hostility will doubtless be far milder than what the ancient Roman Christians endured, at least in the short term, but a new paganism does seem to be in the air, a new polytheistic pantheon of all the world's religions, to which everyone will be expected to bow down. But perhaps this will be accompanied by a newly purified and energized church that instills in its believers the faith of the catacombs.