

Life Notes

THE HISTORY OF CHRIST'S CHURCH

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#5. Summary of The Church in the Fourth Century

The church had survived the persecution and heresy of the third century, but the hatred unleashed upon her in the next century was unparalleled. This was an era of empire-wide malevolence from the hands of Emperor Diocletian. This emperor was committed to a return to the glory days of Rome and was convinced the path to former stability involved a return to the gods of ancient Rome. It is no mystery then why this man hated the church. His intention was not suppression, but rather annihilation. By the amazing grace of God, the church survived and even flourished in some respects. Even so, there was a continued laxity in the lives of many who professed Christ. It seemed the remnant of devout Believers was growing stronger, but smaller at the same time. This concern about carnal living resulted in many Christians embracing a life of withdrawal in order to facilitate solitary lives of prayer, fasting, and meditation. The key to conquering the flesh, they thought, was anchored in severe self-denial. The combined effect of seemingly inexorable suffering and a tendency to withdraw from spiritual conflict seemingly resulted in a period of what appeared to be minimal impact by the church upon the society of the fourth century. However, during the period of the 300s, there was a confluence of three events that would change the course of history.

The first event was the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312. The second was the Council of Nicaea in 325. Finally, there was the conversion of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in 387.

Constantine testified that during the Battle of Milvan Bridge, he saw a vision of the chi rho symbol (the first two letters in the Greek spelling of Christ), and heard a voice from heaven saying "In this sign, conquer!" He attributed his victory to Christ, and immediately

began to lessen persecution and reduce anti-Christian legislation. For a while, Christians were free to worship due to the Edict of Milan in 313. In time, Christianity became the favored religion of the Roman Empire. Byzantium in Turkey became a royal city, and its name was changed to Constantinople, in honor of Constantine. It is argued by some that Constantinople became the "most Christian city" in history. Later the name would change to Istanbul and the region would become part of the Ottoman Empire under Muslim rule.

Though Constantine did much to make life easier for Christians by ending persecution, returning confiscated land, and granting them a favored status, it is argued that he also did great harm to the church by blurring the distinction between true Christianity and a merely "social" Christianity. The result was a severely limited spiritual influence and power in the church. Historians and theologians are divided as to the true extent of his conversion. Three things are worth noting. First, Constantine saw the church not only as a spiritual kingdom, but also as an earthly one. He constantly interfered with church function and asserted leadership that previously belonged only to clergy and bishops. Secondly, he did not submit to baptism himself until old age. Yet, he did consistently and fervently seem to prefer Christianity and assisted his Christian mother Helena to memorialize and honor the Christian tradition in the Middle East. My estimation is that Constantine had a true conversion experience, but was a poor example of personal devotion and sincere fidelity. As emperor, he was a poor church member, to say the least.

The Council of Nicaea (325) clarified the nature of Jesus as fully God and fully man. Arianism had claimed Jesus was a being created by God, and not eternally existent. Athanasius and other devout Christians codified the teaching concerning the nature of Jesus, and the Nicene Creed was produced, stabilizing and unifying the view of the Church.

Space does not permit an adequate discussion of **Augustine** here, but many have argued that apart from the Scripture itself, no writings have been more influential on Church history than the

works of Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo (present day Algeria). His most notable works include Confessions of Saint Augustine, City of God, and On Christian Doctrine. Augustine's conversion was dramatic and profound, and he provided stability and balance concerning many doctrines that had been blurred in the carnal days after Constantine's influence. Both Roman Catholic and Reformed churches claim him as a "father." Even though it can be argued that Augustine was imbalanced in some regard, he was influential in the church for the next thousand years. Not until St. Thomas Aquinas would anyone rival the effectiveness of his writings.

The next century would see the continued ministry of Augustine and a remarkable missionary we know as Saint Patrick.

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.