

Constantine the Great

What would you think if our government proposed a law that forced any person who was in a position to influence public opinion and moral conduct were required to commit public acts that demonstrated their allegiance to the nation and the accepted code of moral conduct?

This would apply to all public figures:

Entertainers; Musicians actors, Movie Producers, sports figures, ...

Leaders; Government, Businesses, Civic, Religious, ...

News Media

There have been periods in US history when this did happen:

Civil War Reconstruction, During WW II, and the following Communist Scare of the 40's & 50's

In each of these, citizens were forced to do things to demonstrate their loyalty. As far as I can tell, none of these carried the weight of law.

During Reconstruction – it took the form of the Pledge of Allegiance

In WW II, German ethnics saw some pressure (example speaking German was suppressed.)

In WW II Japanese were arrested and put in internment camps until after the war. Young men could get out of the camps by volunteering for the military.

Following that war, there was a period when the US was very concerned about the rapid and violent spread of Communism, but unwilling to take military steps to oppose it. The government was purged of communist sympathizers

(Starting with Iowa's own Henry Wallace, who had served in 2 Cabinet Positions and as VP under Roosevelt)

If you watched the movie 'Julie and Julia', a portion of that story was about the ordeal that Julia's husband Paul Childs suffered as a State Department Official.

This effort reached its Zenith under the hand of Senator Joseph McCarthy's Un-American Activities hearings.

I believe much of the excess in the entertainment industry today is response to McCarthy's attack. They go to extremes to push a harmful agenda to push back and anyone who questions their right to do whatever they please.

I bring these things up to set the stage to talk about the similar happenings of the first three centuries of the Church.

I share them to make us confront that there are reasons good people might support a loyalty test for those in the public eye

And, they also remind us that such loyalty tests have a way of going beyond where most people think they should.

This is part of a series of messages prepared to share an understanding of those early years when the

Church went from its most innocent into full blown Apostasy.
These were also the first Centuries of the Roman Empire.

In the last message – I made the point that persecution of the Church was not Official Roman policy.

In the accounts we read in the Bible, we see that the persecution of Christ and of his followers was always instigated by jealous religious leaders. Romans may have meted out punishment on Christians, but it was in an effort to maintain order and not as a general policy of the Roman Empire.

The exterminations that occurred under the reigns of Vespasian and Titus were directed at the Jews. These carried out the destruction of Judaism, as promised by God as a consequence of unfaithfulness. Christians were only caught in this event if they tried to remain Jews.

In the next three centuries, there were persecutions of Christians and other religious groups.

There are generally attributed 10 Christian Persecutions during this period.
They are not persecutions by the Empire itself, but rather by 10 individual Emperors.

A few of them were well intentioned, the some were purely evil, and some were a mix.

The first two, Nero and Dominican (37-96) were mad-men who directed persecution against Christians to draw attention away from their own actions. Both were condemned by the Romans and both died violent deaths to end their rule.

The next two, Trajan and Marcus Aurelius (109-180) affected only minor persecution of Christian leaders who acted out against the Roman Authority. Neither conducted searches to find Christians. Trajan treated tips that someone was a Christian as being motivated by jealousy and did not permit officials to investigate them. These two began the practice of requiring loyalty test of anyone who was suspected of acting against the Empire. The test was that the person was required to recant and offer sacrifice to the Roman gods. The penalty for not doing so was death, but not many Christians died. Roman history lists the “Five Good Emperors” and these were two of the five.

The next four did persecute the Church, primarily acting against its leaders to restrain its growth. They saw the Church as movement that might threaten the Empire.

Septimius (193-211), Maximinus (235-238), Decius (249-251), and Valerian (253-260)

Decius issued the first general decree of persecution against Christians.

The effect of these persecutions turned public opinion against the persecutors. Septimus and Maximinus were assassinated by their own troops. Decius and Valerian died as the result of combat.

Most sources agree that the severe persecution occurred at the hands of the next two, Diocletian and Galerius between the years 303-305. I will talk about these more, so I will not go into detail now. To gain perspective, the estimates of those killed in this persecution were between 3000 and 3500 killed, mostly in the eastern Empire ruled by Galerius. If this were the most severe, then the other persecutions must have affected fewer people.

Many scholars believe that the extent of Christian persecution in the Roman Empire is greatly

exaggerated. Christians who suffered were primarily Church leaders, especially those who created problems.

The persecutions of these two turned public opinion against them and contributed to the Edicts of religious tolerance and acceptance of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The last persecution was very brief, and at the hands of Julian the Apostate (360-363) He persecuted the church by permitting Christian leaders who had been exiled to return and thereby re-kindling strife within the Church. He was killed in battle.

With that background, I would like to bring us the period from 303 to 324 and the reigns of Diocletian, Galerius, and Constantine.

Constantine the Great was also known as:"

Constantine I, St Constantine, and CAESAR FLAVIVS CONSTANTINVS VALERIVS AVGVSTVS

He was born in 272, Ruled as the western Empire from 306 until 324 and an as sole emperor from then until his death of natural causes in 337.

He was the only son of a Soldier named Constantius and his informal wife, or concubine, Helena.

He is known for being a good and just Emperor and for being the one who made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire. The famous First Council of Nicaea was called by him in 325. He was a powerful General, a wise Statesman, an effective shaper of Public Opinion, and a shrewd Politician.

Some Protestants accuse him of corrupting the Church.

My view of him has changed as I study him more.

First, we should consider the Era in which he lived and what it meant to be a Roman Emperor, "Caesar" in this time.

We tend to think of the title of Caesar as being held by one person at a time, as our presidents serve one at a time. We think of Caesar as living in Rome ruling a well organized country.

For most of the Era it was not this way at all. The Roman Empire was so large that it was difficult for one man to rule it all. It was common for the Roman Emperor to appoint subordinates, each of whom would hold the title of Caesar to rule over a portion of the Empire. The most common arrangement was for one to rule the Eastern Greek speaking portion of the Empire; from Greece to the east and south, and for another to rule the Western Latin speaking portion of the Empire, from Italia to the west and north. In 306 Constantine became one of 3 such Caesars.

Timeline

284 Diocletian becomes the supreme Roman Emperor. He appoints three Caesars to help him rule; Maximian, Galerius, and Constantius. Together they expand the Empire through military conquest and diplomacy. Diocletian was unique from his predecessors in that he sought to restore the power and glory of the Empire and of himself personally.

Diocletian reformed taxation to make it fairer and then raised taxes to their highest level ever imposed by the Empire. He used the revenue to expand the size and power of the Roman bureaucratic government.

303 Diocletian and his subordinates began an official Roman persecution of Christians.

Maximian and Constantius went along with issuing the edict, but were reluctant to enforce it. They were the originators of "don't ask, don't tell". If a Christian made trouble for the Empire he would be punished, but they were not sought out.

Diocletian and Galerius, on the other hand did seek them out. Theirs is believed to be the most severe of any Roman persecution of Christians. 3000-3500 persons were killed and the property of many others and of churches was confiscated. I don't mean to diminish the loss of life among Christians, but my point

is that this loss was far less severe than other persecutions. For example, the Roman extermination of Jews living in Jerusalem in the year 70 was claimed by Josephus to have been 1,100,000 with another 97,000 captured and sold as slaves.

Deciding who to single out took the same form as in the time of Vespasian – Military and Civil Officers and Public Leaders were required to sacrifice to the Roman gods or face loss of Office and property. I suspect that the deaths were the result of resistance.

There were three important outcomes of this persecution of Christians

1. Diocletian's actions turned public opinion against him and contributed to his being deposed as Emperor 2 years after the persecution began.
2. Because many Christians complied with the order to offer sacrifice to Roman gods, there was a severe schism in the Church between them and those who had lost property or loved ones to not doing so.
3. Because the Christians who were killed showed that their commitment to what they believed in was so important that they would die for it, the public opinion of Christianity was favorable. The Church grew all the more because of the persecution.

A significant aside here is that God and the Church were glorified regardless of the motives of those who died. Paul spoke of this in Philippians 1:12-18. He acknowledged that not everyone professing Christ was doing so out of pure motives. Yet, he rejoiced that through the power of God, Christ was preached because of what they did. Some of the ones who died may have been simply troublemakers. Most were likely to have acted out of pure motives. God was glorified and the Church strengthened by each and every one who died. (History is filled with fools and villains who became heroes in death.)

305- Diocletian is forced to abdicate. His subordinates immediately begin to battle for control
west Constantius, succeeded by Constantine when he died in 306
west Maximian succeeded by Maxentius when he was killed by Constantine in 305,
east Galerius succeeded by Licinius when he dies in 311.

Galerius issued this proclamation on his deathbed that summarizes his position on the Christians he and Diocletian persecuted:

"Among all the other arrangements that we are always making for the benefit and utility of the state, we have heretofore wished to repair all things in accordance with the laws and public discipline of the Romans, and to ensure that even the Christians, who abandoned the practice of their ancestors, should return to good sense. Indeed, for some reason or other, such self-indulgence assailed and idiocy possessed those Christians, that they did not follow the practices of the ancients, which their own ancestors had, perhaps, instituted, but according to their own will and as it pleased them, they made laws for themselves that they observed, and gathered various peoples in diverse areas. Then when our order was issued stating that they should return themselves to the practices of the ancients, many were subjected to peril, and many were even killed. Many more persevered in their way of life, and we saw that they neither offered proper worship and cult to the gods, or to the god of the Christians.

Considering the observation of our own mild clemency and eternal custom, by which we are

accustomed to grant clemency to all people, we have decided to extend our most speedy indulgence to these people as well, so that Christians may once more establish their own meeting places, so long as they do not act in a disorderly way. We are about to send another letter to our officials detailing the conditions they ought to observe. Consequently, in accord with our indulgence, they ought to pray to their god for our health and the safety of the state, so that the state may be kept safe on all sides, and they may be able to live safely and securely in their own homes

312 Maxentius is killed in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge by Constantine

note – Constantine claimed to have been inspired by a vision prior to the battle. He was told that if he put the symbol of Christ on his soldier's shields and fought in the name of Christ he would prevail. Constantine pledged to serve Christ if he prevailed.

It is important to understand that this did not mean that he became a Christian at this point. There is evidence that he served other gods too. He was baptized, but not until shortly before his death. His policies were those of his father before him, i.e. religious tolerance. He may have supported Christianity, but his character would not have accepted the persecutions that Christians inflicted on each other in the years that followed.

313 – Licinius defeats his rivals,

Constantine & Licinius agree to divide and rule the empire in cooperation.

Licinius marries Constantine's Sister,

Constantine & Licinius jointly issue the Edict of Milan, which officially ends the Diocletian persecution of Christians, restores their property, and makes tolerance of all religions the official law of the Empire.

314-315 Constantine & Licinius engage in a Civil War which ends in a truce that lasts until 321 when Licinius' army pushes an enemy into the territory of Constantine. Constantine's army routes them and pursues them into Licinius' territory. Licinius declares the truce broken

321-323 Constantine attacks Licinius, defeats and captures him, but spares him at the request of his Sister...

324 Constantine accuses Licinius of conspiracy and hangs him.

He becomes the sole Emperor of the Roman Empire.

He makes Licinius' former Capital his own and renames the city Constantinople

Why did these conflicts and wars happen? The scriptures tell us

James 3:13-18

¹³Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom is not that which comes down from

above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. ¹⁸And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James 4:1-4

¹What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ²You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend *it* on your pleasures. ⁴You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James speaks to Christians, but his point is well made concerning the cause of strife between these men who fought with each other until one prevailed over all the others.

You all know I grew up on a farm. I thought of myself as some kind of favorite farm animal, one who got to sleep in the house, until my brother came along. I spent a lot of time with the animals. Chickens and pigs, cows and dogs. Geese & ducks. The amazing thing to me with all these animals was that they could not be happy until they figured out the pecking order. We even call it pecking order because chickens instinctively. There is no peace in the chicken yard until one rooster yields to the others. The head rooster is the one who crows. If the rooster lost his good sense and attacked my Mom, he learned that she was at the top of the pecking order, I was below her, and he was below me – which meant he became chicken and dumplings and the remaining roosters had to fight it out again.

If this series of events resulted in not having a rooster, the hens would go through the same process till they learned who the head hen was. She would crow and everything.

These men were no different. When Diocletian was there and in a position of dominance, these men got along just fine. But when he was out, they immediately began to fight among themselves.

Do you remember when Jesus asked his disciples why they were having a dispute? They were arguing over who was the greatest.

These men, who became the Apostles, were no different from an unreasoning animal. They warred with each other over petty jealousies and felt they had to know who was superior.

Is it any wonder that Constantine and the others spent most of their lives trying to gain dominance over each other? Unity in the animal kingdom can only be achieved when one animal dominates all the others.

In 324, Constantine begins to work to fulfill his pledge to serve Christ.

He should have found the Church Jesus established.

Instead he found a Church with many leaders. They waged war and sought dominance just as his armies did. He expected Unity and found Division,

These words edited from Galerius' deathbed proclamation ring true of these men:

"Christians... instituted ... according to their own will and as it pleased them, they made laws for themselves that they observed, we saw that they neither offered proper worship and cult to the gods, or to the god of the Christians."

Constantine did all he could to observe religious tolerance to all religions and he restored lost property to the Christians. He found them intolerant of each other.

He saw a terrible wrong in that Galerius and Licinius had forced Christians to sacrifice to Roman gods and tried to make it right again. He found Christians who would not forgive their brothers who had been forced to make the sacrifices.

He found men who engaged in bitter disputes over matters that they simply did not have enough information to know. They participated in senseless arguments over the nature of Christ.

Constantine had pledged to serve Christ, perhaps for the sake of honor, perhaps for the sake of faith, perhaps for the sake of political expediency, only Constantine and God know. But the divisions that existed between the religious leaders he found made adopting their faith very difficult. To overcome this, he invited 1800 Bishops to council in the city of Nicaea in the year 325.

In the next message in this series we will examine the issues over which these Bishops disputed and what the outcome of the Council of Nicaea was.

Additional references:

Romans 8:6-8 ⁶For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Philippians 1:12-18 ¹²Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, ¹³so that my imprisonment in *the cause of Christ* has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, ¹⁴and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. ¹⁵Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; ¹⁶the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. ¹⁸What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice. **1 Timothy 6:3-5** ³If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, ⁴he is conceited *and* understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, ⁵and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.

Titus 3:1-3 ¹Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, ²to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. ³For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

1 John 2:15-16 ¹⁵Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.

1 Corinthians 2:14 ¹⁴But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

Jude 1:17-19 ¹⁷But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁸that they were saying to you, "In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts." ¹⁹These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit.