

PARALLEL GUIDE 2

The Roman Empire

Summary

Jesus was born in the Roman Empire; in this setting Christianity first grew. The beginning of Christianity's story is rooted in that empire, its form of government, its science and philosophy, its politics, and its relationship to the church. This chapter provides an overview of that history from the time of Jesus through the fifth century, from the struggles of an emerging faith to the founding of Hagia Sophia, one of the world's great cathedral churches.

Learning Objectives

The first objective of this lesson is to become familiar with the scope and complexity of the first five centuries of Christianity. Many of the terms and the names are unfamiliar, a feature that will remain with us through all the lessons about the early church. When you complete this lesson, you should be able to:

- Become familiar with the geography and organization of the Roman Empire

- Identify the following:

Romanitas

Nero

Diocletian

Julian the Apostate

Emperor worship

Marcus Aurelius

Constantine

Justinian

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

A theme that extends from the early church to our own era is the relationship of church and state. What vestiges of Roman practices do you perceive as still existing in your national government? How does this affect you? How does this affect your local or regional church?

Preparing for Your Seminar

You may be studying church history while others are studying the Bible. Bring to your seminar a sense of the history of the church and the Bible and look at those relationships as a theme to explore in your seminar group.

Additional Sources

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Justo L. A. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (2nd ed. 3 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

Eric G. Jay, *The Church. Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980, pbk.). Covers the concepts, issues, and personalities in enjoyable style.

Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975, pbk.).

Williston Walker et al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1985). A standard work.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A little more than a generation before the birth of Jesus, Octavian—later called Augustus Caesar—defeated his enemy, Anthony, at the battle of Actium (31 BCE). He began a reign that lasted until 14 BCE and became master of the Roman world. As Luke records in the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus was born during the reign of his successor, Tiberius. Thus the new world empire and the emerging ecumenical church (“ecumenical” means worldwide) arose at approximately the same time in history. Consequently, the history and expansion of the church cannot be understood in isolation from the development of the Roman Empire. This was known as early as the second century of the Christian era when a Christian bishop named Melito could address the emperor in these terms: “It was for good that the system we profess came to prevail at the same time that the empire of such happy commencement was established.” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*)

Under Augustus a unified empire emerged. The new emperor gave Rome what it needed and desired: an end to endless civil wars and a unified and pacified world empire. All the lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea lay within Rome’s sphere of influence. Rome’s dominion—usually following the natural boundaries of oceans, rivers, lakes, and mountains—was bounded in the west by the Atlantic. It extended from Britain in the north to the Caspian Sea in the east, then stretched in the south from Spain to the Nile, Judea, and the Euphrates. Over 300,000 professionally-trained soldiers guarded the frontiers against outsiders and internal rebellions.

Military, as well as other factors, produced Roman unity in the empire. First, most of the population possessed a universal language, *Koiné* or common Greek, which supplied a veneer of unity over vastly different people, religions, and cultures. Latin was the language of imperial administration and later became the language of the church in the West, but Greek was spoken by most people and understood almost everywhere. Second, an unrivaled road system, built primarily for the rapid deployment of troops, accelerated trade, broke down regional barriers, and stimulated the transmission of ideas. The network of roads extended for more than 50,000 miles, passing through mountain tunnels as long as 3.5 miles. All roads led to Rome, and philosophers, peddlers of new ideas, and evangelists of religions offering salvation came to the capital. Traveling lecturers and preachers could command wide audiences. Third, a booming economy helped to unify the empire. From the north came rugs, parchment, glassware, and linens; from the south, grain, papyrus, marble, and sulfur; from the east, lumber, silk, jewelry, cotton, and spices; and from the west, iron. Cities began to expand; Rome’s coinage circulated from Britain to the Caucasus. The creation of vast landed estates raised property values and encouraged trade and commerce. The Greco-Roman culture developed the liberal arts and created an upper class that added to the veneer of unity.

Rome was supreme, it seemed, not only in skills of conquest but also in the arts of peace. The literature of the Augustan age had a vitality, depth, and richness unsurpassed in previous eras. The poetry of Virgil, Horace, Propertius, and Ovid; the

The Organization of the Empire

drama of Seneca; and the history of Livy brought Roman literature to its apex. Rome had crushed highway robbers and piracy. Harmony had come to the cities, and “the immense majesty of Roman peace,” as Pliny the naturalist called it, led her citizens to hope that a new age was arising. Virgil, the supreme poet of the empire, wrote in an almost messianic vein of a coming great age: “The great line of the centuries begins anew . . . now a new generation descends from heaven on high.”

Earlier, until the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) the basic social and political unit in the Greek-speaking world had been the *polis*, or city-state, from which our adjective “political” comes. The polis was the town and its rural surroundings, or the city and the territory under its influence. At the very time when Aristotle was affirming that the perfect Greek citizen was a *politikos anthropos* (a political human being) and that the sovereign city-state was the eternal norm of society, his own student, Alexander, was making the theory obsolete and introducing the concept of a world-empire. The concept of the empire, something larger than the sum of its city-states, came to its height under Alexander.

Augustus and his successors adopted and adapted the imperial policies of Alexander. Roman colonies began to appear at places like Carthage in North Africa, Lyons in France, Colchester in Britain, and Corinth and Philippi in Greece. A period of urban development began precisely when Christian evangelists and teachers were bringing their new faith to the empire. Not surprisingly, they went to these centers of population. So, as the church grew in the empire, its organization corresponded to that of the empire. The larger provincial cities had their own churches, each presided over by a bishop who might supervise a number of rural bishops. These city bishops in turn were subordinate to the bishop of the metropolis—hence the name “metropolitan,” meaning the bishop of the capital city of a province. The civil territory was divided into ‘dioceses’, a term the church came to use to designate the region of a bishop’s jurisdiction. The bishop of the chief towns of the civil dioceses was usually known as the exarch, primate, or, in the case of a few very important centers, patriarch. The religious supremacy of Rome, the capital of the empire, is explained by its political position, whereas the politically insignificant Jerusalem—although it was the true metropolis or mother-city of Christianity—had virtually no ecclesiastical prominence.

Rome’s economic survival depended on its slaves, and modern estimates suggest that from one-fourth to one-half of the population of Rome were slaves. As the New Testament shows, many of the first believers in Jesus Christ were slaves. Freed slaves were members of the early churches. Since some of them had administrative skills, we may reasonably assume that Christianity penetrated into the ranks of civil service or public administration through their agency. The New Testament also indicates that some members of the wealthier or ruling classes—Philemon, for instance, at Colossae—were attracted by Christ’s gospel.

Romanitas

For a long time conservative forces maintained the structure of Roman society and kept its institutions from decay. Respect for the wisdom of the past, reverence for the gods, obedience to authority, and self-discipline were ideals of which the Romans

approved. These constituted the *Romanitas* or genius of the Roman. They found their expression in the divine beings whom the Romans honored or in the heroic figures who had served the state.

It was natural to the Roman mind to think in terms of rule and authority. The poet Virgil gave voice to this basic sense of Rome's imperial destiny: "Make it your business, Roman, to rule the nations with your sway. Let these be your arts: to enforce the maintenance of peace, to spare the submissive, and to crush in power the proud." The picture of Rome as supreme among all peoples was imprinted on Roman consciousness. A second mark of the Roman outlook was its reverence for tradition and law. Those who rule possess authority; those who are ruled must show obedience and a disciplined manner of life. The supreme expression of respect for authority is found in the law. Society is guided by and draws its strength from its respect for ancient custom and for the codification of that custom in legal form. A third characteristic of Roman genius was its capacity to organize. The army, the civil service, imperial administration, military architecture, and colonial development, to name only a handful of achievements, bear witness to the skill of Roman organization.

In philosophy and in art, Rome looked to Greece as its teacher and inspiration. The philosophies of Greece had been adopted or naturalized before the superb oratory of Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) reflected the stresses and strains of a crumbling Roman Republic and before Julius Caesar (c. 102-44 BCE) began replacing the republic with the empire. No new philosophical schools arose in the empire, but the Greek schools of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Cynicism found a place in Roman thought.

Philosophy and Morality

Stoicism appealed to the Roman mind, particularly because it provided a legitimate faith and an ethic. It taught a reverence without superstition: the truly wise seek to live in harmony with nature as it is, to welcome all things as in accord with the divine will. As an ethic, it taught that nothing but virtue is good and nothing is bad but vice—both of which, to the inquiring mind, are apparent in nature. Emotions such as pleasure, sorrow, desire, or fear are corrupting, and should be controlled rather than eliminated.

Epicureanism, which never enjoyed much of a vogue, had one brilliant, shooting star, Titus Lucretius Carus (c. 94-55 BCE), who died two generations before Caesar Augustus. He sought to discredit traditional Roman religion and deliver people from superstition. He wrote a sustained assault in a lengthy poem, *De rerum natura*, (*On The Nature of Things*), against the threat of oriental religions that were circulating in the empire. Although Epicurean ethics dictate that a person should live so as to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, one should not equate life with superficial hedonism. Harmony and balance, both in the physical world—and Epicurean physics anticipates in many ways the notions of modern science—and in the ethical and spiritual world, should provide the criteria for pleasure and for pain.

Cynicism, probably prompted by moral corruption in the Roman Empire, was the third type of philosophy imported from Greece. As in the case of Epicureanism,

we should not bring modern connotations to our view of ancient Cynicism. It was not a cheap negativism, but a serious criticism of the morals of its times. Cynics such as Demonax (c. 50-150 CE) were skeptical about religion and thus open to accusations of impiety. They tended to advocate that happiness is found not in things gaudy and stately, or in wealth, but in temperance, justice, and piety.

Finally there existed a kind of skeptical eclecticism. This was less a school than a tendency to borrow from different and even contrasting philosophies. Cicero is one of the best representatives of this eclecticism. He found no contradiction in continuing to uphold the public worship of the gods, while picking and choosing intellectually from whatever source would offer satisfaction.

In brief, at the time of the coming of Christianity into the empire, there was a philosophical preparation for the gospel as well as a political one. Despite the cruelties of the age, there was a humanizing tendency in people's way of thinking, an inclination to regard the human race as essentially one. The philosophers of the age had prepared a mindset that was willing to consider the ideas of Christian evangelists.

Religion and Emperor Worship

No single religion prevailed in the Roman world, and nothing that could be termed a national religion existed. Official rites were performed on behalf of the people by the state. Romans wanted the fates to be favorable. Each citizen had the obligation of paying respect to the gods and goddesses in cults celebrated by the priests under the high priest or *pontifex maximus*, literally, the 'chief bridge builder', the one who builds the bridges that span the gulf between heaven and earth. The formalism of Roman religion was expressed in Cicero's comment that, although he was an unbeliever in the gods, he would always uphold the ancient rites. It was Rome's chief virtue, he said, that it excelled all the other nations in observing religious rites.

Atheism was not allowed to exist. Atheism was not simply a matter of personal or intellectual doubt but could also be seen as an act of political disloyalty. Only those who were indifferent to Rome's fortunes refused to participate in its cults. The charge frequently leveled against Christians in the times of persecution was that they were atheists—meaning that they refused to worship the gods of the state. Apologists for the Christian faith sought to defend Christians not only from the charge, but also from the implied condemnation for their disloyalty to the state.

In the time of Augustus, family worship was still commonplace. Marriage, childbirth, and death demanded the performance of certain rites of purification or atonement. Some people believed that, at death, the shade or soul passed into an underworld and needed the proper rituals to ensure their well-being. Others, like Lucretius, sought to discredit such religious rites:

Death therefore to us is nothing, and concerns us not one whit. . . . In the days to come when we shall be no more, and when the body and soul are put asunder, then to us who shall be no more nothing at all can happen, nothing can arouse sensation, no, not even if the earth be confounded with the sea and the sea with the heavens.

The odes of Horace (Horatius Flaccus, 65-8 BCE), another imperial poet, are urbane and charming. They also reveal a lingering animism that regards mountains, forests, and streams as the dwelling place of nymphs, and woods and hills as the abode of evil or benevolent spirits.

The satirist Juvenal (Decimus Iunius Iuvenalis, c. 50-127 CE) complained that “the Syrian Orontes has long since poured into the Tiber.” The Orontes was a river in Syria. He meant that Rome was becoming an increasingly orientalized city, and many of its residents had brought with them their exotic religions.

Besides the other forms of religion, there were so-called mystery religions that many people found spiritually satisfying. In them, before Christianity came on the scene, the idea of a personal, universal, and sacramental religious faith was widely held. Unlike the state religion, they offered personal salvation and liberation of the soul from its bondage. They were open to all, regardless of birth, race, or citizenship. They offered the rapture of communion with the god and the hope of immortality through their symbolism and sacramental dramas. They had to a large extent rejected the old mythologies. Ideas of monotheism were philosophically acceptable, and the concepts of divine providence, immortality, and communion with god were common to many of them.

The decay that had eroded the old state religion and the impact of oriental religions form only one part of the religious picture. Roman patriotism and the need for a single focus of political loyalty turned the eyes of the Roman people to the throne of the emperor. All soldiers, magistrates, and officials of the state were obligated to participate in an oath of allegiance to the emperor, known as the *sacramentum*. (When Latin became the language of theology in the West, this word came to be used as the equivalent of the more appropriate Greek word *mysterion*.)

When Octavian assumed the rule of the empire, he was given a religious title, Augustus, and by the time of his death the cult of the emperor was widespread throughout Italy. Suetonius (c. 69-140) wrote that the house in which the emperor was born had been declared sacred; his birth was attended by miraculous events; and some even testified that he had been seen ascending into heaven after his death. From the time of Augustus to Diocletian (245-313), a period of three centuries, the worship of the emperor—freely accepted by the people, for the most part—became the test of political and religious loyalty. What began as revering the emperor’s genius as divine after death developed into the worship of the living emperor. Caligula (Gaius Julius Caesar Germanicus, b. 12-d. 41) insisted on being worshiped, even at Jerusalem; Domitian (Titus Flavius Domitianus, b. 51- d. 96) styled himself Lord and God; Commodus (Lucius Aelius Aurelius, b. 161-d. 192) regarded himself as an incarnation of Hercules; and Decius (Gaius Messius Quintus, d. 251) demanded prostration in his presence. Christian resistance to emperor worship was absolute from the first, and their refusal to burn incense to him or pledge loyalty to him as a god led to times of persecution.

The remarkable thing about the church of the early centuries is the extraordinary rapidity with which, in spite of sporadic persecutions, it came into prevalence

Mystery Religions

Religion and Loyalty to Rome

throughout the empire, largely taking the place of the state cult, oriental religions, and even emperor worship itself.

The Christian Mission and the Growth of the Church

2

Early Christian preaching centered on two firm convictions: first, that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead, and, second, that the Spirit of God had come upon the disciples. Those who heard and believed these things constituted a distinctive community to which the name “church” or “catholic church” has been given. This church was a visible and recognizable body, but it did not regard itself as one of the competing religions or as another among the many guilds of the empire. Those who belonged to the church regarded themselves primarily as the communion or community of the Spirit that possessed the gifts of the Spirit—the inward, personal dispositions described by Paul in Galatians 5. Baptism was the seal that granted membership in this community to those instructed in the Christian way of life and belief. They thereby became converts to the kingdom or rule of God. The outward sign—baptism—was given mostly to adults; thus our evidence for the baptism of infants is indirect at best. The instruction, oversight, and worship of the church were entrusted to leaders to whom gradually the titles of bishop, presbyter (or priest), and deacon came to be applied.

When Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome around 57 or 58, he implied that the church there had been established some years earlier. No evidence indicates that Peter had founded the church. Who were the agents of the church’s mission in this early period? Obviously apostles like Peter and Paul traveled from place to place, preaching, winning converts, and setting up at least rudimentary organization for the church. One second-century manual speaks about a wandering order of “apostles and prophets,” although we do not know if these had the task of evangelizing non-Christians.

Some Christians had training in philosophy and set up their own schools. Undoubtedly, however, the chief agents in the task of evangelism were the multitudes of those Christians whose contacts in their daily lives introduced many to the Christian faith. The influence of women was especially strong and played a large part in forming the religious outlook of, for example, of Basil of Caesarea, who developed monasticism in the East with its characteristic family-like ties and ideals of service. Augustine’s strong-willed mother, Monica, expresses some of the uncompromising moralism and commitment to family which gave the fourth century its backbone.

The Catholic Church

Early in the second century Bishop Ignatius of Antioch coined the term the ‘catholic church’ to refer to the true body of Christians as opposed to some whom he regarded as teaching an erroneous interpretation of the gospel. “Catholic,” from the Greek, means universal. The false teachers could not agree among themselves about the gospel. By contrast, the true church taught the same faith ‘universally’—at all times and in all places. This was the mark of the “catholic” (universal) church.

As rival bodies of Christians organized, the institution that had been there all along—as opposed to the new group that was claiming to be the true embodiment of Christianity—began to refer to itself as “the catholic church.” The term catholic first

designated a quality of the church—that its doctrine was universally agreed upon. Later catholic became the name of a particular body of Christians—the Catholic Church.

The population of the whole empire in the first Christian century was probably little more than five million, and even the city of Rome likely had no more than a hundred thousand. By the end of the first century the Christian church clustered around two ‘inland seas’, the western Mediterranean and the Aegean. Christian congregations were found in the crescents that sweep from Alexandria up through Palestine and Syria to lower Asia Minor and from western Asia Minor across northern Greece to Athens and the northern Peloponnese. Scattered congregations had been established elsewhere—in Rome, most notably, and Cyrene—but, in the first century of its existence, the Christian church was little more than an insignificant sect. Yet within five centuries almost the whole of the empire was either strongly Christian or mostly Christian, and Christianity extended beyond the Roman borders, from Ireland in the west to Persia in the east.

The story of the missionary expansion of the church is rich and complex. To recognize something of the colorful diversity, we can look at two quite distinct developments within this period, one in the extreme west of the empire, and the other far to the east beyond its boundaries.

Around the year 397, at a place called the White House—Candida Casa, near what is now the little town of Whithorn on the west coast of Scotland—Ninian built a church of stone. From there he began a mission that in subsequent generations reached Ireland, Iona, southern England, and back across Europe to Vienna.

Nearly two centuries later, an Irish monk named Columba, accompanied by twelve companions, landed on the island of Iona, not far from Whithorn. The little island was Columba’s base of operations for thirty-five years. It became the center of his mission. Missionaries—teachers, agriculturists, musicians, and healers as well as priests—went throughout Scotland and northern England. Columba, like Ninian, saw all life as holy, since Christ is the redeemer of creation. The old traditions are true to this spirit in their songs about Christ at the milking, Christ at the fishing, and Christ at the kindling of the fire.

Ireland

India, far to the East, stands on the crossroads between the West and the East. A tradition of the Syrian Christians in Kerala maintains that Thomas the apostle arrived near Cranganore on the western coast of India, around the year 52 and was martyred at Mylapore, a suburb of modern Madras, around 72. While the evidence is unclear, it is beyond question that missionaries had reached the subcontinent at least by the end of the second century. Pantaenus, a second century convert from Stoicism, journeyed “even to the land of the Indians,” according to the first church historian, Eusebius. There he is said to have come across Christians who were familiar with Matthew’s Gospel. About the same time the writer of the apocryphal *Acts of Judas Thomas the Apostle* describes the missionary work of Thomas in the court of Gondophernes who probably reigned in eastern Iran and northwestern India as early

India

as 45 CE. Whatever the origins of the Christians in India at Mar Thoma, legend persists that Thomas was the martyr-saint who brought Christianity to India.

Church and State Relations

2

The Gospels of the New Testament indicate that the ever-present fact of life for the Jews of Jesus' day was the occupation by forces of the Roman Empire. Romans were the natural and (by right of conquest) political enemies of the Jews. Romans in general had little sympathy with the religious exclusiveness of Judaism and the refusal of Jews to serve in imperial armies. They refused also to worship Rome's gods or give assent to the imperial cult. The historian Tacitus (Cornelius c. 55-115), writing from a Roman perspective, accused the Jews of a "bitter hatred towards all others." For reasons of political prudence, however, the Roman authorities regarded Judaism as a legitimate sect (*religio licita*). Generally Jews were guaranteed the free exercise of their religion and were exempt from conscription laws. In the Roman sense of the term they were the only tolerated atheists in the empire, but they were not allowed to make converts of Roman citizens or marry outside of Judaism.

At first, Roman authorities had difficulty in distinguishing Christians from the Jews of the dispersion. For a time Christianity enjoyed the protection granted to the tolerated sect. As the breach between Christian and Jew widened, the threat of the new religion from the East came to occupy the attention of emperor and senate. In the three centuries before Theodosius the Great (emperor, 378-395) we can trace the complex relationship between the empire and the Christian church by identifying the major developments of the various reigns.

Imperial attitudes toward Christianity fluctuated. The last emperor in the Julio-Claudian line, Nero, began his reign in a benign fashion, but in 64, when fire destroyed the greater part of Rome, Nero assigned blame to the unpopular Christians—"a class of people loathed for their vices," wrote Tacitus, a historian of the period.

The Flavian Emperors, 69-96

The rule of the next dynasty, the Flavians, was on the whole a time of peace for the church, and some people who were high in office, including the elder brother of the emperor Vespasian, seem to have been converts to Christianity. The reign of Domitian ended this period of tranquility. Clement's epistle speaks of the "sudden and repeated misfortunes" which befell the church at that time. The charges laid against Christians, according to the Roman historian Dio, were atheism, indicating a rejection of the gods of Rome or the imperial cult, and blasphemy, indicating presumably some kind of vague offense against the imperial will.

Trajan to Marcus Aurelius, 98-180

Trajan (reigned 98-117) was a gifted natural leader, acutely aware of his imperial mission to bring salvation to the human race. He feared that enemies of the state, who met in secret, threatened the unity of his empire. During his reign Christians came under his repressive legislation and Ignatius of Antioch was martyred. Hadrian (reigned 117-138), Trajan's heir, followed a policy of enlightened centralization of government, but his religious policy was harsh—Jerusalem was destroyed and a shrine to Jupiter built on the site of the Temple. The time of repression was eased during the reign of Antoninus (reigned 117-138), known as The Devout. The treatment of Christians was relatively tolerant, despite the martyrdom of Polycarp of Smyrna

in 155. Ironically, the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), the Stoic philosopher and moralist, was plagued with war and persecution. Severe persecutions of Christians took the life of Justin, who had founded a school of Christian instruction in Rome. Many died in a pogrom in Lyons, France, including a heroic slave girl, Blandina, and a fifteen-year-old youth.

The character of the persecutions of Christians to the time of Marcus Aurelius allows us to form certain conclusions. Persecutions were sporadic rather than constant. Although imperial legislation forbade Christianity as a crime, much depended on the temper and attitude of the emperor. Persecution was mainly local rather than part of a coordinated plan. During this period the martyr came to be regarded as a higher type of Christian, and martyrdom became the supreme means of union with Christ. The date of a martyr's death was observed as a feast, and later a church or shrine might be built on the site of the martyrdom. The anonymous second-century document *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* gives expression to the reverence for the martyrs: "Christ we worship as the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord."

As the second century ended, a new phase in the relationship between the church and state began, when the authorities themselves initiated proceedings against Christians and active persecution became public policy. Yet, although Commodus (180-192) was a despot, intoxicated by power, persecutions actually diminished during his reign. Septimius Severus (193-211) was a political realist who recognized the seriousness of the Christian threat and, around 200, issued an edict forbidding the spread of Christianity. This is the first legislation specifically directed against Christianity. Alexandria, which bore the brunt of the persecution, witnessed the martyrdom of Clement, the head of the catechetical school there. The immediate successors of Septimius were too preoccupied with affairs of state to continue his religious policies.

Commodus to Diocletian (180-305)

In the second half of the century new crises threatened Rome's survival and Roman authorities reacted against any perceived threat. As a result, Christians were never quite certain whether the state was going to blow hot or cold on their missionary activity and social service. Decius (249-251) was a Roman of the old order, and sought to reestablish the ancient virtues of Rome. He regarded Christianity as a disintegrating element within the empire. By virtue of his office as *pontifex maximus*, or high priest, he ordered all citizens to do sacrifice to the gods and to the genius of the emperor on a fixed day. Where compliance was shown, a certificate of compliance or *libellus* was issued.

The Roman Empire was affected by catastrophes, border wars, a declining economy, and pestilence. The effect on the church was catastrophic. Many Christians thronged to the offices of the commissioners for the certificates of compliance. Some bought immunity. Others, however, refused to comply and were tortured or put to death. The effort to eliminate Christianity by brute force proved self-defeating. The pastoral question of how to deal with the lapsed who had obtained *libelli*, however, was difficult. If there was no repentance, the response of the church was clear: excom-

munication. But if there was repentance, what should be done? In Rome, the church tended to be divided between the two policies of lenience and rigorism.

The crisis of the empire in the third century was one of despair and ultimately bankruptcy. If the age of Valerian (253-260) had been as peaceful as that of Augustus, the persecuting edicts of 257 and 258, which sought to reduce Christianity to a private religion, might never have been issued. The leaders of the church were required to offer sacrifice; worship was forbidden, and visits to cemeteries were banned. A second edict pronounced a sentence of death on the higher clergy of the church and stripped Christians of their civil rights and dignities. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was put to the sword. Gallienus (260-268) rescinded the edicts of Valerian and announced a policy of toleration. Although a profligate and inefficient ruler, Gallienus understood the need for a policy of accommodation. For about forty years there was religious peace.

When the army chose Diocletian (285-305) as emperor, affairs of the empire were at a low point. To reconstruct the administration and to provide for a regular method of succession, he divided the empire into two parts, east and west, and set up a four-person imperial college. He was to be the emperor for the East, and Maximian for the West. He improved the defense of the frontiers, reorganized the government, taxed the wealthy middle class, and assumed the trappings of an oriental despot. For over a generation the church had grown in numbers, and its power evidently threatened many of Diocletian's schemes forcing him to issue a series of edicts. Eusebius, the church historian of the following century, records their effect:

Imperial edicts were issued everywhere ordering that churches be razed to the ground, that the scriptures be destroyed by fire, that those holding office be deposed and they of the household be deprived of freedom, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity. This was the first edict against us. But not long after, other decrees were issued, which enjoined that the rulers of the churches in every place be first imprisoned, and thereafter every means be used to compel them to sacrifice. (Eusebius, *History of the Church*)

In 305 Diocletian decided to retire from public life and forced his colleague, Maximian, to do the same. The civil war that followed ended with the defeat of Maximian's son at the battle of the Milvian Bridge (near Rome) in the year 312, when Constantine, who had been hailed in York as the new emperor, invaded Italy to claim his royal prerogatives. In the following year he and his colleague Licinius met to parcel out the empire. The settlement was sealed by marriage. In the spring of 313 the two emperors met at Milan to confer on the welfare and security of the realm. Their imperial edict, the *Edict of Milan*, declared:

We decided that the worship of God ought rightly to be our first and chiefest care, and that it was right that Christians and all others should have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favored; so that the God who dwells in heaven might be propitious to us and to all under our rule. . . . All who choose that religion are to be permitted to continue therein. . . . All others are to be allowed the free and unrestricted practice of their religions. (Eusebius)

The reign of Constantine (312-337) marks the beginning of a new era for the church. The influence of Constantinian Christianity was immense. It determined the direction of the emerging ecumenical church and also created a new kind of Christianity—a religious-political alliance between church and state. This relationship proved mutually enriching, mutually advantageous in the government of the territories of the empire, and at times also mutually frustrating and antagonistic. The Constantinian settlement created “Christendom”—the “domain” of Christ, a social and religious complex with specific territories eventually extended from the boundaries of the old Roman Empire to the lands of northern Europe and the Slavic countries and beyond. Christendom developed one dominant characteristic: the tendency to identify the Gospel with the norms of the prevailing social structure.

For three centuries the Roman government had regarded the infant church with suspicion. During the times of persecution, Christians were charged with many offenses including treason. Since they refused to take a pledge of loyalty to the state, they were atheists who neither veiled their scorn for the gods nor respected the deities on whose favor the common weal depended. Their prayers—“thy kingdom come,” for instance—posed a clear and present threat to the existing order. Their evangelism broke up families; their religion was an innovation and lacked the sanction of antiquity. They were exclusive. Opposition between the church and the state had been continuous, but it was unpredictable and at times violent. The new epoch inaugurated under Constantine is all the more significant when seen against this background of struggle and obstruction.

As Augustus had in Virgil an imperial poet to put into immortal verse the hopes and triumphs of his reign, so Constantine had in Eusebius an imperial historian who hailed the new arrangement in almost messianic terms: “I banished and destroyed every form of evil,” Eusebius reports his emperor as saying, “in the hope that the human race, enlightened through my instrumentality, might be recalled to a due observance of God’s holy laws, and, at the same time, our most blessed faith might prosper under the guidance of the almighty hand.”

Constantine was an unusual figure in the Christianized empire: a revolutionary leader by any measurement, he was nonetheless a despot of pre-Christian character. Yet he was a protector of the church, a believer in its God, and an adherent of its faith. Whatever his private religious convictions may have been, he claimed to have seen some unusual celestial phenomenon which he interpreted as a cross—the sign of the Christians—on the eve of his battle against Maxentius. He told his biographer Eusebius twenty years later that he had been convinced in a dream that the God of the Christians ruled the universe. Armed with this faith he took the cross into battle against his enemies. Some time afterwards the *labarum* (formed from the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek—chi and rho, X and P) displaced pagan signs on the standards of the army.

The legal recognition that the Edict of Milan extended to Christianity was but one instance of his favor toward his newly embraced faith. He also enacted legislation that proposed favored treatment for the Christian church. Whether he sponsored this

legislation for political or religious reasons is not clear; however, he also passed measures of a humanitarian nature to promote family life and grant civil protection for women, orphans, and slaves. In 312 and 313 Constantine sent letters, two to the proconsul of Africa and one to the Christian bishop of Carthage, which further reveal the unprecedented favor accorded to the church by the state. He ordered that gifts of money be given to churches in Africa for their repair, partly to make some restitution for earlier persecution, and partly to express his own piety. He also granted certain civil privileges to the clergy of the church and later ceded important powers to the church's bishops. Sunday became a day of cessation from labor. Toward the end of his reign the favors granted earlier to the church in the West were extended to the East, when Constantine issued an edict requiring magistrates to refuse to participate in non-Christian sacrifices. The effect of the edict was to open civil office to Christians who on grounds of belief and conscience could not have participated earlier in forbidden worship.

The City of Constantinople

In 330 and with full Christian ceremony, Constantine dedicated a new capital at the site of the Greek-speaking city of Byzantium, a superb natural fortress with an excellent harbor on the Golden Horn. The city occupied a unique, militarily strategic location, and lay in a position to control the land routes between Asia and Europe. The bulk of natural resources lay in the East, its cities were more numerous and its industry more developed. After six years of preparation and construction the city, renamed Constantinople, was ready to become the center of the Byzantine world, Greek in culture and language, Roman in law and administration, and passionately Christian in belief.

The formal inauguration of Constantinople in May 330 is a good date to mark the emergence of the Byzantine Empire. Byzantine civilization left a glorious legacy in its distinctive administration, diplomacy, town and country life, education, literature, and art. The tragic fall of Constantinople first to the crusaders and later to the Turks in 1453 wiped out a civilization, although vestiges of the legacy endured for a few more centuries.

Eusebius hailed the new city as the establishment of a Christian empire. Politically, of course, it was a wise decision to move the capital, since Rome as a seat of government was too far from the increasingly eastern orientation of the empire. Constantinople was an obvious rallying point for an empire whose influence reached even to the Orient itself, and it superbly symbolized the hopes and character of the Christianized empire. Old Rome became a city of prestige without power. It remained the seat of the senate, but it was little suited to become the capital of the Christian empire. Many within the church regarded Rome as the great Babylon of the Book of Revelation, whose downfall opened the way for the "Christ-loving emperor" to set up his rule in new Rome.

Constantine intended his conversion to find embodiment not only in his active promotion of the Christian faith but also in buildings of soaring grandeur. Ornaments of silver and gold were taken from temples dedicated to the old gods, and wealth was brought from the old Rome to adorn the new. The famed tripod and statue of Apollo,

venerated in Delphi, were relocated in the Christian city. Churches were erected on a magnificent scale in places like Tyre and Antioch. In Constantinople, whose destiny for nearly a thousand years was to be the cultural, artistic, and intellectual center of Christianity, the first of the great imperial churches were built—Hagia Eirene (Holy Peace) and the Cathedral of the Twelve Apostles. A distinctively Christian style in basilicas, baptistries, and chapels emerged.

Constantine was baptized at the end of his life, postponing his baptism until his deathbed when he could sin no more. By that time the Christianization of the empire was well advanced. A line had been established in history, and a new world had come into being.

After the death of Constantine, the privileges that he had given to the bishops and clergy of the catholic church were enlarged to include families of clergy, and a kind of clerical caste arose. His sons and successors continued his religious policy, but the benign neutrality toward paganism gave way to a sustained attack on old Roman practices. “Let superstition cease,” it was declared in an edict of 341, “and the madness of sacrifices be abolished.” The old gods were being brought down to earth and overthrown. The altar and statue of the goddess of victory were removed from the senate in Rome. Oddly, however, both Constantine and his sons retained the title “high priest” (*pontifex maximus*) indicating that they still regarded themselves as official heads of the religion of the state. They continued to distribute sacred offices and even endowments for the performance of the old Roman religious rites.

The Christian faith he had embraced, however, soon presented him with an ongoing problem. Rather than providing the unifying cement his empire desperately needed, its own internal disputes erupted into public view. Acting as the *pontifex maximus* as he had proclaimed himself, he called what was to be the first of a number of councils intended to work out these disputes. The first such council, held in 325 at Nicea, across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, established a precedent. His successors called several other councils over the next few centuries, when other disputes arose.

By the fourth century the church had developed a long tradition of opposition to paganism which was expressed in the form of ‘apologies’ or explanations of the Christian position. Its philosophical critique, expressed in apologists such as Justin, in effect demystified the old religion. Within a generation or two of the formal establishment of Christianity within the empire, however, adherents of the old religion began to awaken from their slumbers. Constantine’s sons had come to power by a policy of terrorism and political assassination. A cousin, Julian, survived his father’s murder, and was brought up, by his mother, a devout Christian. While still in his early teens, he was banished. Although he was a Christian, he was attracted to a circle of devotees of the old religion who convinced him that his destiny was to restore Greek life and religion to the empire. Long before his apostasy from the Christian faith became public, Julian had been initiated into the “priceless secret” of the Eleusinian mysteries, an ancient fertility cult with ecstatic rites.

The Second Wind of Paganism

Julian the Apostate

The last surviving relative of the sons of Constantine, Julian became a hero to his armies. He eventually returned to Constantinople as emperor. Taking Marcus Aurelius as his model in philosophy, he restored the worship of the gods. As a result Christians could no longer expect promotion to high office or favored treatment from the state. Christians, he said, praised poverty, after all. Although he repudiated the church and its teaching, Julian admired it enough to imitate it, and sought to reorganize the empire into a kind of pagan catholicism. “Metropolitans” of provinces were appointed to supervise all temples and priests in their territories. Priests, “lovers of the gods and lovers of their fellows,” were to be honored above all public officials and regarded as intercessors between the gods and the people. Julian also instituted a system of charitable relief, distributed corn to the poor, established hospitals, and commended those who fed the hungry and clothed even enemies and prisoners.

In Jordan, Julian was hailed as “liberator of the Roman world, restorer of temples, re-creator of the common weal.” Riots erupted throughout the empire, and Christians again became the victims of violence. Julian, in combat with his troops to secure Roman interests in the East, was struck in the side by a stray spear and died, surrounded by his philosopher friends. The attempt to revive paganism had failed and the clouds that had momentarily darkened the church were lifted. With the death of the last pagan hero of the empire, prospects for the church seemed even brighter than before.

Theodosius I and Theodosius II

Julian’s successors restored Christianity as the state religion. Theodosius I called the First Council of Constantinople in 381, the second of the so-called ‘Ecumenical Councils’, to reinforce decisions that had been made at the First Ecumenical Council that Constantine had convened at Nicea in 325. His grandson, Theodosius II, founded the university in Constantinople and called the Third Ecumenical Council, the Council of Ephesus, in 431. He is best known for the code of law he commissioned. The Code of Theodosius held sway in the East until Justinian’s reign. It banned paganism, penalized heresy, and regulated the position of clergy as well as the relations of church and state.

The Reign of Justinian

Justinian (483-565) became undisputed emperor in 527 and began a reign that left a legacy that embodied two great ideas, the imperial and the Christian. As an imperialist, he was imbued with the strengths and recollections of his Roman heritage—*Romanitas*. He sought to restore the unity of the empire and regain lost territories by great military enterprises. The Mediterranean once again became a Roman lake. Justinian was also a legislator of supreme ability, who believed that Roman law was the cohesive force of his society.

By the sixth century the decrees of emperors and opinions of lawyers had become so numerous that it was well-nigh impossible to separate the contradictions and codify the law. The inspiring genius in charge of the emperor’s program of legislation was another of his well-chosen collaborators, Tribonian. There could be no cohesion in the empire without law. In Tribonian, a pagan of brilliant intellectual powers, the emperor found a jurist to compile a new code and restore the edifice of Roman law. In the year 530 an imperial edict introduced the new code. In the same year another

massive undertaking was launched: the arrangement of former interpretations of the law (with repetitions and contradictions removed) in a digest. National unity was cemented through law.

Justinian had one other supreme mission—to be the champion of orthodoxy, to propagate the true faith, and to recreate the Christian empire. The resurgence of paganism in the Balkans indicated that in vast areas of the empire Christianity had not yet gained the allegiance of the people. Beyond this, Christianity's own internal disputes continued to threaten unity.

In the vast southeastern sweep of the empire the religious sympathies of the Christian population were Monophysite, a view concerning Christ that we explore later, but that, in brief, held that Christ had only one nature, not the two natures of divinity and humanity as orthodox had been defined. The problem was that the pope and the western church had little sympathy with Monophysite doctrines. If the emperor showed favor to the Monophysites in Constantinople, the pope and the western church showed hostility. Correspondingly, any attempt to secure doctrinal agreement with the West would drive Monophysite subjects into sullen opposition to the emperor.

In Egypt the Monophysite church with its Coptic language and religious literature was in effect the national religion. Justinian's own wife, Theodora, was personally attached to the Monophysite cause. Although Monophysitism had been condemned a century earlier at the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the political and military problems remained. Egypt was not the issue. The territories adjoining the Persian frontier were. If Monophysitism should become the energizing center of a nationalist and separatist movement, their trustworthiness as bulwarks against external foes would be lost.

Justinian was in an awkward position. For political, military, and religious reasons he was committed to orthodoxy. His choice to reconcile the Monophysites only resulted in condemnations. After considerable wrangling an ecumenical council was called at Constantinople in 553 to resolve the matter. Commonly called the Fifth Ecumenical Council, it was a personal triumph for Justinian and eastern orthodoxy.

Justinian sought to embody his ideals of unity in religion in the churches built throughout his empire. They served as centers from which Christianity and Byzantine civilization would radiate among surrounding pagans and heretics. Throughout Justinian's reign churches were built profusely in militarily strategic areas. The erection of a Christian place of worship became a sign of the increasing triumph of Byzantine Christianity and civilization against both paganism and the invasions of the barbarians.

The supreme architectural achievement of Byzantine civilization, however, was the Church of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia. Christ had become the invisible Lord of the empire, but Justinian's building would symbolize for Constantinople and for the empire Christ's universal lordship and the religion protected by the Christian emperor. Justinian's biographer, Procopius, described it as "a spectacle of marvel-

Justinian's Religious Policy

lous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay altogether incredible. For it soars to a height to match the sky, and, like a ship riding at anchor, higher than the other buildings, it looks down upon the remainder of the city, adorning it.”

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The site of Hagia Sophia is magnificent, with the land sloping on three sides to the shore of the Sea of Marmora. Justinian had commissioned two master builders to conceive the plan, Anthemius and Isidore of Miletus. The two, engineers and mathematicians of extraordinary abilities, achieved their intended effect of majestic weightlessness and harmony by combining a vertical symbolic center with a horizontal axis for solemn processions. Even in its present form—a huge museum and no longer a place of worship, and with the delicate minarets added in its Islamic period—the building overwhelms the visitor by its vast light-filled space. Procopius refers to the huge spherical dome: “It seems not to rest upon solid masonry, but to cover the space with its golden dome suspended from heaven.” Hagia Sophia remains a brilliant testimony to imperial Christian architecture, never equaled.