

THE EQUIP INSTITUTE

Theme: Christian Heritage

Topic: The Imperial Church (284-590 AD)

3rd Semester / Spring 2024

Introduction

The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. The topic tonight is the period from 284 to 590 AD. The theme is the Imperial Church.

The Legalization of Christianity

The Roman Empire was in decline when Diocletian took the throne in 284. To facilitate renewal, he divided the empire into a tetrarchy in 293. Diocletian instituted the worst persecution of the church to date. In 306, Constantine joined the tetrarchy. Constantine refused to continue to persecute the Christians in the part of the empire he controlled. He cultivated loyalty from the Christians as he began moving to consolidate imperial rule back into the hands of a single emperor.

In 312, Constantine invaded Rome. He met Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, about five miles North of Rome. Constantine defeated Maxentius and drowned thousands of his soldiers in the Tiber River. In response to a vision, Constantine had a Christian symbol put on his soldiers' shields. He marched into Rome and was declared the sole emperor of the western half of the empire.

In 313, Constantine and Licinius, the emperor of the eastern half of the empire, agreed to the Edict of Milan. The treaty included three provisions: (1) Constantine and Licinius wouldn't go to war with each other; (2) Licinius would marry Constantine's half-sister; and (3) Christianity would be legalized and all confiscated properties would be returned to churches. Licinius and Constantine still battled for control of the Roman Empire until Constantine finally became sole emperor in 324.

A Christian Emperor?

Constantine continued to publicly favor Christianity. In 330, he relocated his throne to Constantinople. But Constantine also maintained strong ties to paganism. He retained the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, which made him



the official high priest of the state pagan religion. His first coins included images of pagan gods. When he declared the first day of the week a public holiday in 321, he named it in honor of the sun rather than the Christian God. The sun was the sign of Sol Invictus, whom Constantine possibly conflated with the Christian God with Sol Invictus.

Constantine played a crucial role in legalizing Christianity and setting it on the road to becoming the official imperial religion. He believed Christianity would restore the glory of Rome. Constantine was baptized near the end of his life, which may have indicated a final break with traditional paganism as well as his personal confidence in the superiority of the Christian faith. In 381, Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. By 1000, virtually all Europeans except Jews and Muslims were professing Christians.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

During the fourth and fifth centuries, the state supported the church in rejecting several key errors about God in general and Jesus Christ in particular. Ecumenical councils of bishops renounced heresies and clarified orthodoxy. Emperors called many councils, and even when councils were called by church leaders, the empire cooperated with the church in enforcing the decisions of the councils. There were four main councils in the early church: Nicaea (325); Constantinople (381); Ephesus (431); Chalcedon (451). Each council helped clarify key doctrines related to the Trinity and Christology. (See the chart below.)

Church, Sin, and Grace

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is arguably the most influential theologian in church history. He engaged in two key controversies. The Donatists claimed the sacraments were only valid when presided over by a bishop who was morally pure. They were concerned because some bishops had surrendered the Scriptures to the Roman authorities during persecution, effectively disqualifying them from Christian ministry. For the Donatists, the church is a holy body that should be separated from the world.

Augustine argued every church includes both saved and unsaved members, and even leaders could sometimes be unbelievers. The validity of the church's sacraments and



ceremonies is tied to the church's unity and orthodoxy rather than clerical purity. Augustine argued the empire should compel the Donatists to conform to mainstream Christian practice.

Augustine's second major controversy was with Pelagius, an English monk who argued that Adam's original sin has no effect on the rest of the human race. Pelagius claimed people are born without sin, we only become sinners once we choose to sin, and some people never choose to sin. For Pelagius, there are two ways to be saved: either perfectly obey all of God's commands or trust in Jesus Christ for salvation if you are a sinner. He also argued sin doesn't affect human free will in any way, so even those who need to believe in Jesus simply choose to do so apart from the Holy Spirit.

Augustine responded that Adam's original sin affected all humanity. We are born sinners, which leads all people to inevitably and habitually choose to sin. Our free will has been so corrupted by the fall that we never totally choose the good; even our best choices are tainted by sinful motivations. All people must trust in Jesus Christ for their salvation, but none will do so without God's enabling grace to believe, which is a gift he bestows only upon the elect whom God chose to save before the foundation of the world.

The church agreed with Augustine's critique of Pelagius, but Augustine's alternative was controversial. "Semi-Pelagians" affirmed Augustine view of sin, but they rejected his idea that we need special grace to believe in Jesus Christ. Semi-Pelagians argued that belief is a simple freewill decision; once we believe, God gives us the grace to complete our salvation. Semi-Pelagianism was officially rejected in 529, but it became the default view of most medieval Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

Monks and Missionaries

Many Christians were convinced the best way to please God was to separate from the world and devote themselves to Bible study, prayer, and meditation. Early on, male monks lived by themselves while female monks clustered into small groups. Anthony (251-356) was the most famous solitary monk. One of Anthony's protégés, Pachomius (292-348), pioneered communal monasticism when he began gathering male monks into small communities, which evolved into the earliest monasteries.

Anthony and Pachomius proved influential. Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers popularized the idea that the monastic life was inherently more holy than the ordinary Christian life. John Chrysostom (347-407) and Augustine argued that pastors should embrace celibacy and simplicity. Jerome (342-420), who translated the full Bible into Latin, founded a monastery in Bethlehem. The most important monk was Benedict of Nursia (480-547), who founded the Benedictine Order.

Many monasteries became missions outposts that intentionally spread the faith to unevangelized parts of Europe. Patrick of Ireland (389–461), a former slave-turned-monk, trained hundreds of missionary monks to spread the gospel all over Ireland. In thirty years, Patrick and his associates planted 200 churches and baptized around 100,000 converts. Columba (521–597) established a monastery on the island of Iona that sent hundreds of missionaries all over Scotland and northern England.

Barbarians and Popes

Between 410 and 476, northern invaders conquered and occupied most of western Europe (the “fall” of the Roman Empire). Some of the so-called barbarians were pagans, while others were Arians. The barbarians assimilated with the indigenous peoples they conquered and, over time, most of Europe was divided into hundreds of smaller kingdoms. Virtually all the barbarians and their descendants gradually became Christians between 500 and 900. Sometimes the conversions came about through preaching and missions, but often the barbarians were converted through conquest.

The papacy emerged as a new institution that slowly filled the leadership vacuum created with the collapse of the western Roman Empire. Roman bishops had been arguing for their unique authority since at least the third century, but two popes played a key role in creating the papacy. Leo I (440–461) argued the pope is preeminent because of Petrine succession, claimed the title *Pontifex Maximus* for the Bishop of Rome, and was the first Roman bishop to be buried under what is now St. Peter’s Basilica. When Attila the Hun attempted to invade Rome in 451, the emperor fled the city. It was Leo who met with Attila and persuaded the barbarian general to spare the city. Leo is probably the first pope in the sense that we use that term today.

Gregory I (590–604) had previously served as a secular prefect in Rome, become a monk, and then been appointed as a papal representative to Constantinople. Under his influence, the papacy took upon itself many of the prerogatives previously held by the emperor, including negotiating with foreign powers, acquiring property for Rome, and appointing governors over Italian cities. Gregory was also a gifted theologian who wrote a pastoral handbook and developed the concept of the seven deadly sins. Gregory is the last of the Church Fathers and the first medieval pope. The start of his papacy in 590 is frequently cited as the beginning of the Middle Ages.

The last member of the royal family living in Rome was executed in 476, marking the end of the old Roman Empire in western Europe. But Constantine had moved the imperial capital to Constantinople in 330 and the imperial bloodline continued in that city. Though Constantinople claimed to represent the Roman Empire throughout the Middle Ages, most historians call this the Byzantine Empire to distinguish it from the old Roman Empire. As the Middle Ages began, western Christians increasingly preferred to call themselves **Catholics**, while eastern Christians preferred to call themselves **Orthodox** (though everyone liked both terms). What began as two different trajectories within one church gradually developed into two different churches.



The Four Ecumenical Councils

Date	Place	Heretic	Heresy	Hero	Response
325	Nicaea	Arius	Jesus is divine, but has not always existed	Alexander of Alexandria	Creed of Nicaea
381	Constantinople	Apollinaris Pneumatomachians (“Spirit-fighters”)	Jesus had a human body, but a divine soul The Spirit is a created being	Athanasius Cappadocian Fathers	Nicene Creed
431	Ephesus	Nestorius	Jesus’s divine nature was fused to his human nature at birth	Cyril of Alexandria	Hypostatic Union Communication of Attributes
451	Chalcedon	Eutyches	Jesus’s divine nature overwhelmed his human nature	Leo the Great	Chalcedonian Definition