

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROMAN EMPEROR CONSTANTINE

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROMAN EMPEROR CONSTANTINE FOR THE CHURCH

Objective

The children learn about the change in the position of the Roman emperors toward the Christian church.

Contents

- Christianity becomes the state religion.
- The consequences for the Christians and the church.



Introductory
Remarks1 **Constantine's changes**

Against all odds, Christianity had gained a foothold in all areas of the huge Roman Empire during the first three centuries.

In 324 Constantine (285–337) became emperor of the entire Roman Empire, after already having become emperor of the western part twelve years earlier. It had always been extremely difficult to keep the empire together—it had come into being by conquering many peoples—because the different sections of the population came out of varied traditions and spiritual influences. Gradually the population no longer respected the previous belief in many gods and emperor worship as before. There are two main reasons for this: on the one hand, the Christian faith, which was spreading more and more; on the other hand, totally new conceptions from the Orient brought back by traders.

The emperor's influence on the people had weakened considerably. Constantine perceived Christianity, which more and more of his subjects professed, to be a potentially unifying force for his huge empire. That is why he endeavoured to obligate the Christian church by granting preferential treatment and turn it into a political instrument of the state.

Christian unity was threatened, however, because of a doctrinal dispute concerning the question of whether Jesus Christ was to be regarded as a being that is equal to God, or one that was created¹. Constantine took the initiative, and in the year 325 convened a council (a church gathering) in Nicaea, a city in the north-western part of present-day Turkey. As the supreme religious authority of the Roman Empire (pontifex maximus) the Emperor, who had not yet been baptized², acted as if he were also the chief bishop of the church. About 250 to 300 bishops accepted his invitation, five of which were from the western church.

¹ The doctrinal dispute goes back to Arius (256–336), an Alexandrian presbyter. His followers were called Arians. Arius claimed that Christ had been one of God's creatures, and had only been elevated to be God's Son by a godly act of will, and that Christ and the Father were essentially identical in character and nature. This doctrine was rejected at the Council of Nicaea in 325. The considerable favour shown by Emperor Constantius—a son of Constantine's who reigned from 337 to 361—to the Arians, however, enabled them to gain renewed strength and become widespread. According to some historians, Arianism became the empire's official theology under Emperor Constantius. With the death of Emperor Valens in 378, Arianism disintegrated. Nevertheless, various Germanic tribes adopted the Arian form of Christianity.

² Emperor Constantine was only baptized twelve years later on his deathbed.

Constantine listened to the opposing doctrines regarding the aforementioned issue, and pressed the bishops for a resolution. The outcome of the discussions is expressed in the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople.

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

“And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spake by the prophets. In one holy universal [catholic] and apostolic church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen” (Catechism-QA 35).

Initially, the Christian church in the Roman Empire was united by the Nicene Creed, which, in the form modified at the Council of Constantinople in 381, is fundamental for the belief of Christians, including New Apostolic Christians.

Constantine made the Christian religion the state religion, and assumed the leadership of the church. He favoured it more and more, but also brought his influence to bear for his personal advantage.

2 Promoting the eastern patriarchy

Both the Bishop of Rome and the Bishop of Byzantium on the Bosphorus again and again claimed to be the supreme bishop of the church.

Emperor Constantine had the old, badly ruined city of Byzantium magnificently rebuilt and shifted his seat of government there. The city was renamed Constantinople in his honour.

The Patriarch¹ of Constantinople felt his claims to leadership of all Christianity were strengthened by the transfer of the imperial residence.

In general, the emphasis on church leadership was clearly put on the eastern Patriarchs. The Bishop of Rome was only recognized in a leadership capacity for the Apennine peninsula (present-day Italy) and Gaul.

3 The origins of the papacy

The expression “pope” was nothing out of the ordinary initially. Addressing bishops as “papa” (father) was common since the third century AD. The Roman Bishop himself used this form of address with the other bishops. As of 440 the title of pope became the official term used with reference to the Bishop of Rome.

4 Schisms

In 395 the Roman Empire was divided into independent eastern and western empires. This intensified the rivalry between the bishops of Rome and Constantinople. The Bishop of Rome emphasized that Rome was the only patriarchy in the western Mediterranean area. In the eastern region, several patriarchies also endeavoured to achieve supremacy. Especially following the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Eastern Roman emperor laid claim not only to the administration of the entire church, but also to the right of approval when choosing a Roman bishop. This and other issues led to harsh clashes between Rome and Constantinople. In 484 these finally resulted in the first split into an eastern and western church, which lasted 35 years.

In the meantime, another dispute concerning the nature of Christ had flared up. It could not be settled at the Council of Chalcedon (451), but afterwards led to the creation of Monophysitic churches²: the Coptic Church in Egypt, as well as the national churches of Syria and Armenia. All three still exist today.

1 The term “patriarch” was used for bishops whose official seat was in provincial capitals. There were patriarchies in Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome. In addition to “patriarch”, the term “metropolitan”, derived from “metropolis” (a term referring to “provincial capital”), was also used.

2 The so-called Monophysites did not recognize the doctrine established at the Council of Chalcedon (451) that two separate and non-interchangeable natures had existed in Christ. Instead, they stressed the unity of the two natures, which came about through incarnation. (Christ’s incarnation is the manifestation of the godly word.)

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5 The Bishop of Rome gains power

Although the first split into a western and an eastern Roman church could be settled superficially, the conflict continued to smoulder for several centuries. Both regions diverged more and more, not only with respect to cultural and political but also theological matters.

While the Patriarch of Constantinople came under the supervision of the Eastern Roman emperor, the institution of the papacy could gradually become stronger, since there no longer was a Western Roman emperor. When Pope Leo III crowned Carl emperor of a “new” Roman Empire at Christmas in 800, this sealed the pope’s position of power, including secular power.

6 The final split of the eastern and western churches

Over the course of the centuries, the two wings of the church grew further and further apart, both spiritually and culturally. In 1054 a final split (*schisma* in Greek) came about at a gathering in Constantinople. The papal nuncios left a letter of excommunication on the main altar of the main church, Hagia Sophia, by which the Patriarch of Constantinople was expelled from the church. The latter in turn excommunicated the Pope in Rome and his following.

The century-long battle for supremacy had led to the break-up. From this time on, there was no more communication between the western and eastern church. The Pope was now the senior among the bishops in central and western Europe.

Lesson Plan

Lead-In

Workbook, Exercise 1

The children work on the exercise.

Implementation

Discussion

Emphasize the following:

- The Roman emperors had the power to determine the religion of their subjects.
- Many laws concerning the practise of religion hitherto enacted by the emperors were contrary to God’s commandments.

Question Prompt

- Faithful Christians did not comply with such laws.
- Someone who professed Christianity therefore had to reckon with discrimination, persecution, imprisonment, and even the death penalty.

What changes came about when the practise of Christianity was permitted in the Roman Empire by the emperor?

Christians

- did not have to hide any more,
- were no longer persecuted,
- were able to meet in public and conduct divine services, and
- were no longer at a disadvantage compared to the Gentiles.

Board

Under Emperor Constantine, who reigned from 306 to 337, Christians were no longer persecuted.

Workbook

The board text is transferred into the workbook.

Workbook, Text

The children read the texts aloud.

Discussion

The children describe the content of the texts in their own words.

Teacher's Presentation

Tell the children about the drastic changes that were now introduced.

- Crucifixion as the death penalty was abolished.
- Emperor Constantine ordered Sunday to be the common day of rest.
- He encouraged the advancement of Christians into higher public office positions.
- The bishops from the provincial capitals headed the clergy. They called themselves patriarch (from the Greek, meaning "progenitor") or papa (from the Latin, meaning "father").
- Constantine gave the bishops judicial powers. They were able to pass judgment and have it enforced.

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Question Prompt	What were the consequences of the emperor giving the bishops such power?
Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The bishops were recognized and respected in society.■ They had certain advantages compared with the rest of the population. They enjoyed certain privileges.■ Because of the preferential treatment by the emperor, the bishops felt obligated to deal with church matters in a manner that was pleasing to the emperor. <p>They, and the church as a whole, became dependent on secular power. The community of the faithful, whose sole Lord Jesus Christ wanted to be, had changed into a church which allowed itself to be heavily influenced by the reigning secular power.</p>
Teacher's Presentation	<p>Something else which Emperor Constantine did during the time of his reign had far-reaching consequences for the Christian church.</p> <p>From time immemorial, the capital of the Roman Empire had been Rome. Emperor Constantine, however, shifted his seat of government to Byzantium on the Bosphorus, after he had this old city—which in the meantime had become badly ruined—magnificently rebuilt. Henceforth the city was called Constantinople in his honour. Today it is called Istanbul.</p>
Workbook, Theme Picture	The children look at the map. The cities of Rome and Byzantium are indicated.
Teacher's Presentation	<p>Explain to the children that during the course of time the bishops of these two cities became the most important in the Roman Empire. From 440 onwards the Bishop of Rome called himself "Pope" (derived from papa).</p> <p>Over a period of centuries, the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch in Constantinople battled for supremacy among Christianity. After many clashes, a split into an eastern and a western church finally came about in the year 1054. The eastern church called itself Orthodox Church (orthodox means holding the correct or conventional opinion), the western church called itself Roman Catholic Church (Catholic means universal).</p>

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Elaborate with the children on the fact that although the association of the state and the church brought with it much relief, it also resulted in the proclamation of the gospel no longer being exclusively a matter for the responsible clergy. Claims to power gained more and more significance.

The children do the exercise and discuss it.

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