

CHURCH HISTORY

The Church Victorious (313 A.D.)

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Early Church History, part 12

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Some events of history have great effects upon the Christian Faith as well as the secular world. Such an event was the Battle of Milvian Bridge.
- B. This battle brought both good and evil for the Christian Church, and perhaps the professing church has not yet recovered from the effects.

II. THE BATTLE OF MILVIAN BRIDGE

- A. At this point in history, the Roman Empire for all practical purposes was divided into two sections: east and west. In A.D. 306 the Roman army in Britain proclaimed Constantine emperor. They gave him the sovereign rule over Britain, Gaul and Spain. Maxentius, another Roman general, ruled over Italy and North Africa, and wanted to be emperor over the entire western part of the Roman Empire. Maxentius showed increasing hostility towards Constantine. Constantine, seeing the handwriting on the wall, decided to get the jump on Maxentius and marched against him before Maxentius could make preparation for war. Constantine marched into Italy at the head of an army of forty thousand men.
- B. At Saxa Rubra, ten miles from Rome and a little north of it, the armies of Maxentius and Constantine met. Between Rome and the army of Maxentius was the Tiber River, and crossing it was the Milvian Bridge. The army of Maxentius was three times as large as that of Constantine, and it contained the Praetorian Guard, the best fighting men of all the Roman armies.
- C. Constantine, feeling the seriousness of the situation, felt the need for supernatural help. As a pagan, he was a worshipper of Mithra, the Persian sun god, who was the soldier's god. On the evening before the battle, Constantine claimed to have seen a cross above the sun as it was setting in the west. In letters of light the cross bore the words: Hoc Signo Vinces, which means "in

this sign conquer.” Though the vision may have occurred, it is also possible that Constantine needed the support of the Christian soldiers in his ranks to win the battle, and thus made up this story. We do know that something profound did effect him and cause him to show favoritism towards the Christians.

- D. On October 28, 312 A.D., Constantine’s armies crossed the Milvain Bridge, cutting down the armies of Maxentius. The Praetorian Guard fought like lions; they never gave ground, but their ranks were cut down where they stood. Constantine now became the master of the entire western Roman Empire.
- E. Constantine felt that the God of the Christians had helped him win the battle. He therefore made his profession of being a Christian. Constantine’s favoritism toward the church may have been just a matter of expediency so that the church might serve as a new center of unity and save the classical culture and the empire, which was then crumbling. Only God knows whether Constantine was truly saved. Perhaps there was a mixture of superstition and expediency in his policy towards the church. Constantine delayed his baptism until just before death and kept the position of Pontifex Maximus, chief priest of the pagan state religion. Also, he executed every young man who might have had a claim to the throne. These things might indicate that he was not truly a saved man.

III. THE EDICT OF MILAN

- A. In March A.D. 313, Constantine, with the concurrence of Licinius (a weaker joint-ruler in the east), issued the Edict of Milan concerning religion.
- B. This edict permitted freedom of religion in the Roman Empire. It did not do away with paganism, but it made Christianity equal with all the other religions. It did, however, put an official stop to the persecution against Christians from the state, restoring to the church all places of worship which had been confiscated, and making good all losses.
- C. Licinius, however, did not continue to abide by the Edict of Milan. So, eleven years later, Constantine defeated him in the battle at Adrianople and became master of the whole empire, east and west. Christianity now enjoyed complete freedom throughout the Roman world.

IV. THE GOOD FROM THE EDICT OF MILAN

- A. It became acceptable to be a Christian, especially since the emperor himself professed to be a Christian.
- B. Christianity raised the moral tone of society so that the dignity of women was given more recognition in society.
- C. Christianity put an end to gladiatorial shows.
- D. Christianity did not eliminate slavery, but it helped slaves receive milder treatment from their owners.
- E. Christianity helped Roman legislation become more just.
- F. Christianity made the spread of missionary work in the empire easier, for now Christians were welcomed.
- G. Christianity brought the keeping of the Lord's Day, Sunday, as a day of rest and worship throughout the empire.
- H. December 25 was set aside as the day to worship the birth of Christ.

V. THE CORRUPTION FROM THE EDICT OF MILAN

- A. *Conflict Between Church and State:* Constantine had granted the church position, protection and aid. In turn he demanded that the church should allow him to have a good deal to say about its affairs. Constantine maintained a close relationship with the bishops and did his best to settle the various controversies which arose in the church. This led to an intervention by the state in church affairs. From that day to this very day, the issue of the relationship of state and church has caused much disagreement, strife, and even bloodshed. Until A.D. 313 the state had no dealings with the internal affairs of the church.
- B. *The World Invades the Church:* After A.D. 313, it became acceptable to become a Christian, for all persecution of the church had ceased. There were many material advantages to being a Christian. The Christian name became a passport to political, military and social promotion. As a result, thousands upon thousands of heathen joined the church. Most of these folks were Christian in name only and knew nothing of the new birth that comes from

God. Corruption now entered the church. Many pagan temples were converted to Christian churches, but all that really changed was a name above the door.

- C. *Favoritism to Bishops:* Constantine “battered up” the bishops so as to keep them under his thumb. Constantine liked to be arrayed in splendid robes. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that he presented the bishop of Jerusalem with a set which vied in splendour with the rest of vestments in the Christian church. This is the first instance of the use of vestments in the Christian church.
- D. *Favoritism to Clergy:* The clergy was given a high place in society, which led to even more special hierarchy separate from the laity. For the first time Christian ministers were exempt from going into the army.
- E. *The Church Becomes Aggressive:* During the first three centuries, the church was extended by peaceful means. The victory over heathenism was won not by fighting, but by love and enduring suffering. But after 313, Christians at times employed methods of war to advance their cause.

VI. CONCLUSION

“The Edict of Milan marks the victory of the church over heathenism. This victory of the church is one of the most marvelous things in all history. The church had had its beginning as a very small organization only three hundred years before. It was composed of people who belonged to the small and despised Jewish nation. The members of this organization were poor people without education or prestige. The message which the church brought was to many who heard it either a stumbling block or foolishness. Arrayed against the church were overwhelming numbers, money, learning, culture, social prestige, political and military power: the whole world of that time, Jews and Gentiles, the mighty Roman Empire. Not infrequently the Church was disgraced by serious moral lapses of some of its members. It was rent asunder over questions of church discipline. It was harrassed from without by strange doctrines and deadly heresies. It was harrassed from within by heated and bitter controversies over questions touching the very heart of its message. In the midst of these unfavorable conditions, which could have stopped all growth, for three hundred years, the church was subject to fierce and bloody persecutions.

“How was it possible for the church to emerge victorius from all these conflicts? Many things can be mentioned in explanation. One thing is that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. It has always been true that the more martyr blood there is

shed, the more the church grows and flourishes. But there is only one complete, all-comprehensive answer, and that is Christ and his supernatural care for his church. The existence of the church is indeed a marvel” (Kuiper, *The Church in History*, pp. 26-27).