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“How Constantine Created the Christian Church”

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What marks the beginning of the Christian Church, the social organization uniting Christians? The answer depends on the definition of “church.”

If “church” means the people who adhere to Jesus’ teachings, then Jesus began it. Some Christians believe that Peter founded the church at the behest of Jesus himself. Others would see the first church as the Jerusalem Church, created by the disciples after Jesus’ death and led by James until his death in 63 A.D.

But if the founding of the church is defined as the first body of Christian leaders who could determine accurate Christian belief and establish with sound authority their definition of Christianity across the Mediterranean world, then the single man most responsible for that achievement was Constantine I, the emperor of Rome. Although the creation and organization of the church was clearly a process that took place over several decades, the founding event was the Council of Nicea in 325.

If Jesus died sometime around 30 A.D., why did it take nearly three centuries to found the organized Church? There are three main reasons.

First, travel and communication were difficult at that time. It was difficult to make decisions and to run organizations that had offices more than a day’s walk, or perhaps horseback ride, apart. When trading businesses established offices in different ports, for example, they had to operate essentially as independent businesses because of the difficulties of coordination. Fledgling Christianity sent out missionaries to establish new Christian communities, but then had to allow each community to run itself, as indicated by Paul’s letters to the churches he established.

Second, there was little agreement about Christianity’s beliefs and teachings, the nature of Jesus and God, what writings were sacred, or even how to worship. There was a wide variety of views, many of which were later declared heresies: Donatists in North Africa, Gnostics in Egypt and Arians in Syria. And do not forget the Adoptionists, the Modalists, the

Manicheans, the Montanists, the Marcionites, the Ebionites, the Nestorians and the Meletians, to name just a few.

Third, imperial persecutions of Christians happened every few decades. These drove Christianity underground and caused many Christians to turn away. But almost worse were the rifts that appeared afterward between Christians who kept the faith and those who apostatized to save their lives, both of whom still considered themselves Christians.

Constantine appeared on the scene in the midst of the so-called Great Persecution, begun in 303, under Emperor Diocletian. By 305, the problems caused by the persecution were overtaken by those of determining Diocletian’s successor. More than six different generals would fight to become next the emperor. Constantine stood out because he became a Christian and unabashedly made Jesus the patron of his army. By 313, just two contenders remained, Constantine and Licinius. The two jointly issued the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity a legal religion and officially ended the persecution. But, it was not until 324 that Constantine finally became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

Constantine saw Christianity’s belief in one god as a way to unify the empire that had been so badly divided for two decades. But he discovered that Christianity itself was not unified. So, he called the Council of Nicea in 325 to bring together the 1,800 bishops from around the empire to work out official doctrine and provide the basis for a unified Church. Constantine paid for the entire council and even paid for travel, giving bishops the right of free transportation on the imperial postal system.

The council laid the foundation of orthodox theology (Catholic theology) and declared several differing theologies heresies. Constantine’s support initially gave Orthodoxy the ability to require Christians to adopt their doctrinal formulation. While during the next few decades, the church’s fortunes waxed and waned, within a century, Christianity had been declared the official religion of the Roman Empire and non-Christian religions were in steep decline.