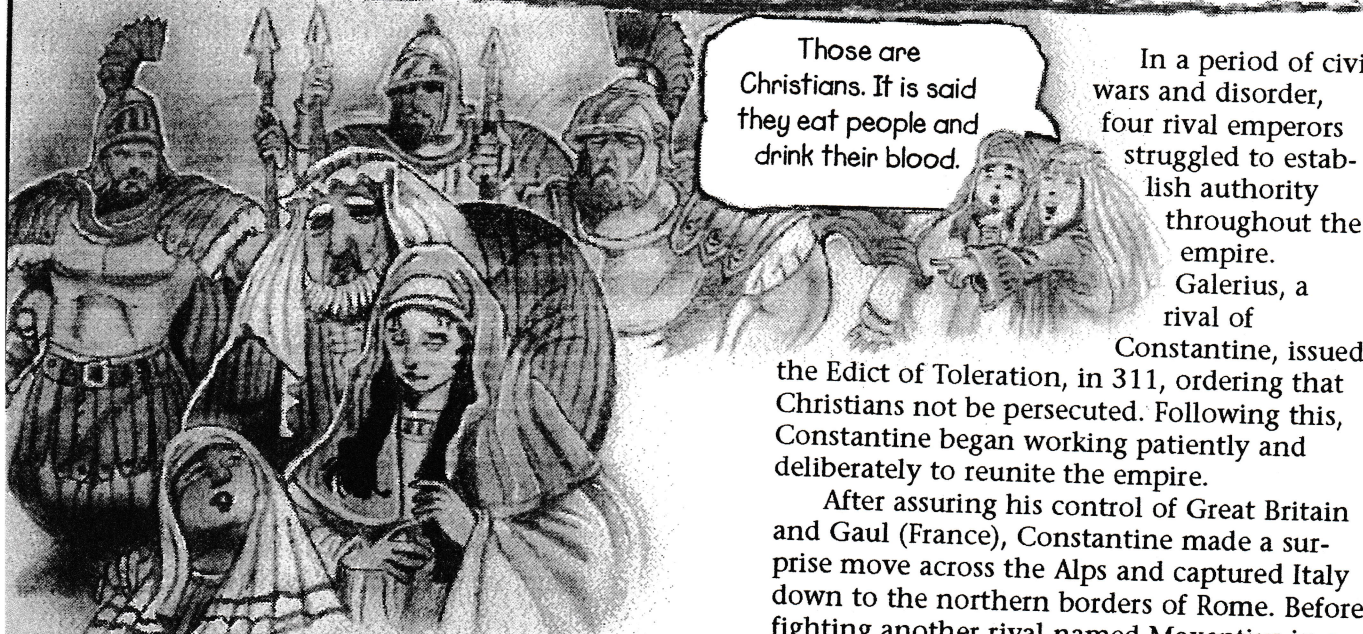


4 Constantine Brings Peace



Those are Christians. It is said they eat people and drink their blood.

In a period of civil wars and disorder, four rival emperors struggled to establish authority throughout the empire. Galerius, a rival of

Constantine, issued the Edict of Toleration, in 311, ordering that Christians not be persecuted. Following this, Constantine began working patiently and deliberately to reunite the empire.

After assuring his control of Great Britain and Gaul (France), Constantine made a surprise move across the Alps and captured Italy down to the northern borders of Rome. Before fighting another rival named Maxentius in a battle for Rome, Constantine had what was called an *in hoc signo* experience. Christian historians say that either in a dream or in the sky, Constantine saw a cross with the Latin words for "in this sign conquer." The cross was then used as an emblem on the shields and standards of his army. After Maxentius fell off a bridge and drowned, Constantine became ruler of the West.

Who Was Constantine?

Constantine was the Roman Emperor from A.D. 306–337. Many consider him a great help to the early Christian church, yet evidence indicates he was not baptized until just before he died. As you read about him, consider whether you think Constantine supported the Christian church because he was a believer or because it helped him to be a stronger emperor.

A Time of Persecution

In its first two centuries, the Christian church had a limited influence upon government and society. Very few Christians belonged to the ruling class. Christians were generally regarded as segregated and antigovernment because they didn't worship the same gods as other people. Christians were also thought to be strange because they worshiped in tunnels and cemeteries.

In the late 200s and early years of the 300s, Christians were persecuted throughout the Roman Empire. Following a 20-year period of peace, persecutions reached their fierce peak in 303 before finally coming to a halt.

The Rise of Christianity

Constantine planned and worked to conquer the rest of the empire. His negotiations with Licinius, a third rival (and also his brother-in-law), resulted in the Edict of Milan in 313. This reinforced Galerius' final edict not to persecute Christians and to return their property. Constantine hoped to win over members of the senate and bureaucrats. These moves made people more accepting of Christianity.

Constantine further concentrated his control by capturing Byzantium (known today as Istanbul) from Licinius and by building on its outskirts a whole new city named Constantinople. Reporters from that time indicate that Licinius, fearing the "magical power" of the cross, instructed his soldiers not to look

at the cross on the shields of Constantine's armies. Constantine continued to experience success in battle, and, in a few years, he ruled the whole empire.

Constantine's goal was to be emperor of a unified Roman Empire. Political unity within the Roman Empire was based upon the emperor's willingness to adopt features of any religion. This contrasted with Christianity, which holds to *one* true God and Jesus as the *only* Savior from sin.

Throughout this period of support for Christians, Constantine worshiped both the true God and the Unconquered Sun (a pagan religion involving emperor worship). His Christian Baptism took place on his deathbed.

As Christians obtained freedom of religion in the empire, there arose more arguments about the faith. When conflicts about who Christ is threatened to disturb the peace in the empire, Constantine, in 325, called together the First Council of Nicaea to resolve the differences. Out of this council came the Nicene Creed, which affirms that ~~the~~ Jesus is truly God.

With Constantine's conversion, (a) the church became first tolerated, then supported; (b) church membership began to include the wealthy and ruling class, whereas earlier it was composed mostly of the lower class; (c) worship became more formal (influenced by the Roman courtly customs), whereas earlier it had been a less formal "gathering"; (d) the basilica (church building or court) became the accepted meeting place, whereas earlier people met in homes, catacombs (tunnels), and cemeteries; (e) some Christians were so grateful to the government for no longer persecuting them that they accepted the wrongs in society and government.

Faith on the Rise

1. Should you pray for national leaders if they propose policies that you believe are absolutely against what the Bible teaches? See 1 Timothy 2:1-2. If yes, what key thoughts should be in that prayer?

2. List two reasons you believe the church might be stronger in times of *persecution* and two reasons it would be stronger in times of *peace*.

3. Defining *church* as a "denomination," which do you think is better, for the government to have nothing to do with the church, for the government to give limited support to all churches, or for the government to strongly support one church? Tell why you chose the response you did.

4. What reasons would you give to support the idea that Constantine wanted to serve God by how he ruled? On the other hand, what would suggest that he served his own interests by how he ruled?

5. What do the words "in this sign conquer" mean to you in your life?

To Review and Remember:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. *Romans 13:1*