

THE RISE AND SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity originated in the eastern Roman Empire in the first century A.D. It began as a sect of Judaism in Palestine, in the Roman province of Judaea, with the birth and death of Jesus. The life and teachings of Jesus would alter the course of western history. For two centuries, Christianity spread slowly throughout the Roman Empire. The early spread of Christianity can be largely attributed to Paul, a Jew from the Greek city of Tarsus in Asia Minor. During the first half of the first century, Paul traveled throughout the eastern part of the empire spreading the gospel of Jesus.

Later, through other people's missionary work, Christianity spread throughout the rest of the Roman world. It was first adopted among the urban-dwellers in the big cities of the empire, including Rome. During the third century, Christian communities throughout the empire grew at a rapid rate due to the insecurities of the time. The people of the Roman Empire had lost faith in the state and were seeking individual and personal salvation. To satisfy this religious quest, the people turned to the sacramental religion of Christianity. Christianity was also popular because it offered the emotional satisfaction of religious love and preached the equality of all people. It was a literate religion that accepted Classical culture and, as a result, also attracted the educated members of the empire.

The official religion of the Roman Empire was the Roman state religion, which, like the Greeks', involved the worship of many gods. It was a *polytheistic* religion and is known as *paganism*. The Romans also worshipped the emperor as a god. The Roman state tolerated any religion that did not threaten the tranquility and safety of the empire. As long as the people participated in the worship of the emperor and the state religion, the Roman state did not interfere in their private lives. The Christians, however, refused to worship the Roman gods and the emperor. As a result, during the first three centuries A.D., the Christians were regarded as traitors and were persecuted by the Roman emperors.

Persecutions of Christians had started under Nero, when they were blamed for the big fire of Rome that occurred A.D. 64. They continued to be carried out on a small scale by Domitian, Marcus Aurelius, and Septimius Severus. The persecution culminated in the reigns of Diocletian and Galerius, between 303 and 311. This was known as the "Great Persecution of Christians." Then, in 311 Galerius issued the Edict of Sophia, an edict of tolerance in favor of Christianity. Christianity was legalized in the eastern half of the Roman Empire.

After the resignation of Diocletian and Maximian, the planned succession of the tetrarchy broke down in confusion. By 310, there were five emperors ruling the Roman Empire. Among the rulers was Constantine the Great (306–337) who eventually emerged as the sole ruler of the empire. Constantine had succeeded Constantius in 306 as ruler of



Constantine legalized Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and was himself baptized a Christian on his deathbed.

the western half of the empire. Constantine defeated, one by one, the other rival emperors. In 312 he defeated Maxentius in the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in Rome and became sole ruler of the western half of the empire. At this battle, Constantine asserted that his victory over Maxentius was due to a miracle. According to his biographer, Eusebius, just before the battle Constantine saw a flaring cross in the sky and the following inscription: BY THIS SIGN THOU SHALT CONQUER. The sign was the Christian XP (Chi-Rho) sign, which he put on the shields of his soldiers. In this way, Constantine became the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, although he was not baptized until the moment of his death. In 324 Constantine defeated his remaining rival in the East, Licinius, and became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. (See map on page 91.)

During his reign, Constantine the Great initiated a series of measures favoring the Christians. In 313 he issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized Christianity throughout the empire. He exempted Christian clergy from any secular obligations, such as paying taxes. Imperial funds were used to subsidize the building of churches in the provinces. In addition, Constantine took steps to defend Christianity by taking actions against current heresies that had emerged. In the fourth century, separate movements within Christianity developed due to disputes and controversies in the doctrines of the Christian belief; most notable of these was *Arianism*. Arianism was founded by Arius, an Egyptian priest from Alexandria who disputed the positions of the three individuals of the Trinity (God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). Arius and his followers believed that the three individuals of the Trinity were not equal, unlike the Christian belief. In 325 Constantine tried to resolve the dispute by calling a meeting of church leaders at the Council of Nicaea. This meeting produced the Nicene Creed, which declared Arianism a heresy. In short, Constantine was responsible for the conversion of the empire from paganism to Christianity.

In regard to the domestic affairs of the empire, Constantine continued to carry out the reforms begun by Diocletian. He tightened control of the empire and increased taxation. He continued to reorganize the army by increasing the proportion of German troops and elevating them to high positions. When Rome was no longer capable of serving as the capital of the Roman Empire due to its distant location from the boundaries, Constantine founded a new capital. He built the new capital on the Greek town of Byzantium, located on the Bosphorus Strait, and renamed it Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). Constantinople was ideally located to supervise both the northern-Danube and eastern-Euphrates defenses.

Christianity continued to flourish under Constantine's successors. In the reign of Theodosius I (378–395), Christianity took another important step forward. Theodosius became known as “the Great” because he insisted on the rigorous practice of Christian orthodoxy. He suppressed any remnant of paganism and Arianism, and by the end of his reign (394), Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Christianity was one of the most important Roman legacies to Western civilization.

Name _____ Date _____

CHALLENGES

1. Where did Christianity originate?

2. What is meant by a polytheistic religion?

3. What was the Roman state religion called?

4. What is the Edict of Sophia?

5. Who was the first Christian emperor of the Roman world?

6. Who made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire?

7. Name the edict that legalized Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

8. Who was Arius?

9. What was Arianism?

10. At which battle did Constantine the Great see the XP sign in the sky?

Name _____ Date _____

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Why did Christianity spread so rapidly throughout the Roman Empire and eventually become the official Roman state religion?

2. Why do you think Christianity is regarded as the most important of Roman legacies to Western civilization?

3. The Romans tolerated other religions as long as they did not endanger the state. Why did they react so violently toward Christians?
