



## **Week 8: The Early Church**

### **Pastor Brian Zahnd**

I think of the early church as the “pre-Constantine church,” from AD 33 to 313 with the Edict of Milan. I think of the patristic period as the 2nd–7th centuries from 100 to 662 (Maximus the Confessor).

#### **Emperor Constantine and the Rise of Imperial Christianity**

Constantine (272–327)

Falvius Constantius and Helena

Battle of the Milvian Bridge (October 28, 312) “In this sign you shall conquer” A pious legend probably invented by the Christian historian Eusebius during Diocletian’s persecution (303–305)

Edict of Milan (313) - Emperor Constantine had several motives: Paganism was tired and a new state religion could unite the Empire. Many among the Roman elite were now Christian.

Constantine admired the church’s organizational system under the bishops and there was genuine interest via his mother.

The Edict of Milan marks the transition from the Early Church to the Imperial Church. Thus the birth of Christendom (a conflation of Christian faith and Imperial aspirations).

This was a mistake, but probably an inevitable mistake. According to Gerhard Lohfink:

*The development toward an imperial Church and finally toward a state religion was almost a matter of necessity, given the constellation of late antiquity. Perhaps the Church had to take that road. It was a grandiose attempt to create a Christian “empire” and thus to unite faith, life, and culture.*

*Only a careful look at the people of God in the Old Testament, their experiment with the state and the collapse of the experiment, could have preserved the Church from repeating the old mistake. But it was not possible in late antiquity or in the Middle Ages for people to read the Old Testament so analytically. Political theology was, instead, enraptured with David and Solomon. Only the history of the modern era shattered the dream. Today the experiment is truly at an end and can never be resumed.*

- Gerhard Lohfink (as quoted in *A Farewell to Mars* pgs. 190-191)

*The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*  
by Alan Kreider

By the time of Constantine, 10-12% of the Roman Empire was Christian. Despite imperial persecutions, Christianity was growing at the impressive rate of 40% per decade.

Much of what worked for the early church in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries is probably not applicable or replicable for the church of late modernity.

### **How did the early church have such remarkable growth?**

Missionary activity essentially ended with the first generation of apostles. From St. Paul to St. Patrick (5th c.) there were no formal missionary efforts.

The "Great Commission" was believed to have been fulfilled by the Apostles. Matthew 28:19–20 was used to teach the Trinity, not missionary evangelism. Christianity spread organically through Christian merchants, sailors, and soldiers.

The early church did not seek to attract "visitors" or "seekers" to their gatherings. In fact, from Nero's persecution in 64 until the Edict of Milan in 313, Christian worship services were closed to outsiders.

### **What did early Christian worship look like?**

Mostly in private homes, kiss of peace, prayer with uplifted hands, songs, liturgy, lectionary, sermons, charismatic expressions, Eucharist

Pagans became Christians through the process of catechism (apprenticeship).

Catechism was the process of discipleship that led up to baptism.

Catechumens would gather for teaching from the bishop several times a week. Though there was no set length for catechism, three years was typical. The emphasis of catechism was not doctrine (the mysteries) but habits (ethics).

“Christians are made, not born.” –Tertullian, c. 200

There were three kinds of people who were forbidden catechism:

1. Prostitutes (The novelty of Christian sexual ethics)
2. Gladiators (The radical prohibition against the taking of human life)
3. Actors (Because of its almost inseparable connection pagan mythology)

Soldiers were in a special category.

“The hand that has held the Eucharist will not be sullied by the bloodstained sword.” – Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage

“God does not use violent means to obtain what he desires.” –Irenaeus

“Faith must be defended not by killing, but by dying; not by violence, but by patience.” – Lactantius

The early Christians were truly pro-life. They would not support or practice abortion, infanticide, gladiatorial games, war, or capital punishment.

Rumors:

1. They were atheists. Because they didn't worship the gods.
2. They were cannibals. Because of their practice of the Eucharist.
3. They were incestuous. Because of their habit of calling one another brother/sister and they were egalitarian.

The early church endured periodic persecutions. Martyrdom was highly venerated.

“The Blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” –Tertullian

Baptism in the early church