One, Holy, Constantine’s and Paul’s Church

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Pope Francis said: “Instead of being just a church that welcomes and receives by keeping the doors open, let us try also to be a church that finds new roads, that is able to step outside itself and go to those who do not attend Mass, to those who have quit or are indifferent” (Brainyquote.com). Although Pope Francis is speaking about today’s Church, the early Church was also trying to find new roads during the first, second, and fourth centuries. Jesus, the figurehead of the Christian faith, was a messianic figure who preached a new interpretation of the Jewish law. After the death and proclaimed resurrection of Jesus, several groups of followers grew out of his teachings. Among these groups, two men emerged as leaders to guide the future Catholic Church in the first and fourth centuries: Paul and Constantine.

Paul, a former persecutor of Christians, converted to Christianity after receiving a vision from God. Paul then went on to preach all across the Mediterranean, converting large masses of people to his new interpretation of Jesus’ message. Paul focused on converting the Gentile people, or those who were non-Jews. Because he preached to and converted the Gentiles, Paul was ostracized by James, the leader of the Jerusalem Jesus movement that followed Jesus’ message as well as the Jewish laws. The ideologies of each of these future saints would face off in the Council of Jerusalem, and be documented in the Acts of the Apostles.

Despite its persecution in the second and third centuries, Christianity rose in the Roman Empire through its legalization by Constantine. Constantine was the Roman emperor in the fourth century who embraced Christianity after his own vision from God. He would come to use Christianity as a political tool as well as religious one, since the Empire could rally around
Christianity. When heresy arose in the Church, Constantine called a council to identify the main beliefs of Christianity and rid the faith of any false teachings. Though diverse beliefs emerged among the early Christians, the actions of Paul and Constantine centered the Christian faith’s beliefs and practices.

Before discussing the believers of this man, Jesus, he must be discussed. The closest thing to first-hand accounts of those who met Jesus are the Gospels found in the Bible. The Gospels were written between the years of 60–100 CE, nearly 30 years after the death of Jesus (“What are the Gospels?”). The obvious gap in the writing of the gospels and Jesus’ death provides a lot of time for reinterpretation and confusion of his message. The Gospels are full of inconsistencies. For example, only two Gospels hold a Nativity story (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-14), and all of the passion stories rely on Mark’s gospel account (Shorto 171). Though there might be some discrepancy about the Gospels, their writings influenced hundreds and thousands of people to convert to Christianity. Though, the greatest, and most debated, statement in the gospel is the claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus’ Resurrection, whether or not it happened, was a major turning point in human history. The stories that surround the mystery have inspired many faith traditions across the world. The idea of a man being raised from the dead is mind boggling, and certainly an extreme display of faith. Some, like Thomas Sheehan, would say that the term “resurrection” was a term that people just grew into saying about Jesus (Sheehan 108). Others, like the early disciples, would claim that Jesus rose from the dead and talked to them (Luke 24:36-49, John 20:19-23). There is only circumstantial evidence to be offered of whether the resurrection did or did not happen, for that topic would be pure speculation. This paper describes only what Jesus’ followers did with his message and the events that happened post-Resurrection. With that being said, the
Early Christian beliefs can be understood better through the perspective that the Resurrection did take place, or at least the believers have faith that Jesus rose from the dead.

After Jesus’ departure from the earth, his followers were chastised by Roman Emperors, and one of the persecutors, Saul experienced a conversion. Saul’s conversion would change Christianity, because he wrote about and influenced new Christian beliefs. As read in Acts, Saul is blinded by a great light and hears a voice that asks why he is persecuting Christians. The voice then asks Saul to get up and go into the city to be baptized and to receive his mission. Once in the city, Saul met Ananias, who baptizes him and cures his blindness; he is then renamed Paul. Paul then commits himself to preaching about Jesus (Acts 9:1-22). Paul’s conversion was a significant event for Christianity not only because he wrote 14 epistles that ended up in the Bible, but also because he would influence the direction of Christianity (NAB Table of Contents). This direction would encompass both Jews and non-Jews into God’s Kingdom.

The perspective Paul brought forth opposed the idea of James, the leader of the Jewish Jesus Movement (Shorto 177). Paul’s group was called the “Hellenists,” while James’ group was called the “Hebrews” (Brox 6-7). The Hellenists were mostly composed of Gentiles and opposed to following the Jewish law, for this reason, they were expelled from Jerusalem. The Hebrews, however, remained in Jerusalem because they respected the Law (7). This difference divided the early Christians, because there were disagreements over Jesus’ message, who to include, and which laws to follow. The Hebrews, who still considered themselves Jews, followed the Jewish laws. The Hellenists, by choosing not to follow Jewish laws, created a division. Another difference of beliefs is based upon the desire on whether or not to allow Gentiles, or non-Jews, into the Church. The Hellenists believed that Christ’s message should go
to all people, whether or not they are circumcised or are Jews. On the other side, the Hebrews believed the followers should be circumcised and have to come from a Jewish background (7). Paul and James discussed this topic at the Council of Jerusalem. However, Peter mediated the matter between the two sides by proclaiming:

My brothers, you are well aware that from the early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us. He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. Why, then, are you putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither or ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they (Acts 15:7-11).

As Peter states, the resolution allows Gentiles into the Church without having to follow Jewish law. However, the Hebrew Christians would have to continue to follow Jewish practices. Peter’s proclamation shows that Paul won the argument over who should be allowed into the Church. This decision will help the Christians, as it will make the religion easier to convert to with fewer laws, and more appealing to pagans.

Without Paul, the Church would not have spread throughout the Roman Empire, nor would it have a central interpretation of Christ’s message. It was Paul’s Christianity that is preached across the Mediterranean and planted into the minds of Gentiles. While the small group of Hebrew Christians was still in Jerusalem, this group would soon run from Jerusalem during the Roman destruction of the temple (The First Christianity). James Tabor says in his article “Christianity before Paul”: “The fundamental doctrinal tenets of Christianity, namely that Christ is ‘born in flesh,’ that his sacrificial death atones for the sins of humankind, and that his resurrection from the dead guarantees eternal life to all who believe can be traced back to Paul—
not Jesus” (Tabor). For these reasons, the Christianity that was first established after the time of Jesus was Paul’s, not Jesus’. Through all of his epistles, and his interpretations, Paul’s Christianity is the one that rises to faith amongst the early Christians.

There is another man centuries later that would also influence Christianity as much as Paul did: Constantine. Emperor Constantine, who would come to convert to Christianity after a vision in the sky, legalized and supported Christianity throughout his empire (Brox 46). As one will come to see, Constantine may have picked Christianity to promote a political agenda, not just a religious faith. He bent and twisted the bishops and beliefs so much, that he, like Paul, pushed his idea of Christianity onto the believers of Christ.

Constantine came from a political family, and the political prowess of his family fueled his desire for power. His father, Constantius Chlorus, was the Augustus in the Roman East, while Constantine served under Diocletian in the Byzantine East. However, when Diocletian resigned from the Augustus in the East, Constantine was not named as a successor. In response, Constantine returned to his father’s court to be a member of his army, and when his father dies he takes over and makes claim to the throne (Constantine). Constantine’s desire for power can be seen before he claims to be the rightful ruler in the West. By leaving the East and reuniting with his father, Constantine is attempting to come to power from another angle; however, there is another Roman who thinks he claims the throne—Maxentius. Maxentius, who overtook Rome while Constantine and his father were fighting, was full of empty promises and lies (Constantine). However in the battle against Maxentius, Constantine would receive help from a new source—the Christian God.

Constantine, before his Battle against Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome, received a vision from God (Brox 46). This vision would ultimately lead to Constantine’s
conversion to Christianity, and his influence of its doctrine. As the story goes, Constantine looked up into the sky and saw a cross. Around the cross was the Latin phrase hoc signo victor eris, “By this sign, you will conquer” (Grant 138). According to Eusebius, early Church historian, Constantine “constantly made use of this sign of salvation as a safeguard against every adverse and hostile power, and commanded that others similar should be carried at the head of all his armies” (Eusebius: Conversion of Constantine). Constantine quickly won the battle against Maxenius, with this new God’s sign pained on his soldiers’ shields. The sign was a Chi-Rho, a “P” and “X” in Greek, which also happens to be the first and last letters of Jesus’ name (Grant 142). These two symbols are a curious choice, since the Chi-Rho was not a common Christian symbol, and it was also used by the pagans (143). There are many discrepancies across Constantine’s conversion story, mostly because there are two versions, one with a cross and another with the Chi Rho. Constantine also could have dreamt of the sign and not seen it as a divine vision (140). Also, due to the double meaning of the Chi-Rho, Constantine could be using the symbol to promote Christianity without upsetting pagans (143). By this possibility, one can see the politics slowly sneaking into Constantine’s new religion. No matter whether it was a dream or vision, Constantine embraced Christianity from that point forward. He became a believer in the Christian God, not any of the Roman gods or goddess that he venerated earlier his life. Though, the prospect of Roman unity, under the umbrella of Christianity, did not leave Constantine’s mind.

Constantine saw the Church as an opportunity. Constantine needed to unite the Roman Empire, and he thought that using Christianity would do so. He felt that the organization of the Church would help him in the backing of his empire (151). To bring Christianity onto the same level as Paganism, Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan in which he states:
Considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought - among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred” (“Edict of Milan”)

By bringing religion to the front of the Roman Empire, Constantine shows that he is attempting to manipulate the people through religious tolerance. He is creating an equal playing field for all religions, thus, making all citizens equal and possibly create unity.

In the scheme of Constantine’s desire to unite Rome, a difference of beliefs still stood to separate the Christians, heresy. No longer divided about their ties to Judaism like during Paul’s time, Christians now asked questions about Jesus’ divinity, or the nature of humans. The main heresy was formed by Arius in regards to the “level of God” that Jesus was. He preached that Jesus was subordinate to the Father, because God stood alone as the creator and origin (Brox 155). This heresy diverted away from Constantine’s unity due to the Church’s lack of a central teaching on Jesus or the Trinity at the time (154). Arianism spread quickly across the East of the Roman Empire, so much so, that Constantine felt the need to intervene. In response, Constantine called a council to discuss the tenants of the Church as well as the relationship to the Empire.

He began the Council of Nicaea on May 20, 325 of about 300 bishops who hailed from around the Empire, mostly from the East (157). Constantine allowed the bishops to debate the heresies as long as they condemned Arius’ teachings (Grant 173). Constantine’s blind following of the bishops, as long as their ideas counter those of the Arians is a prime example of using the Church to do this political bidding. The complete dismissal of the Arians comes in the Nicene Creed constructed by the Bishops:
We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion--all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them (Nicene Creed).

The first four lines confirm God’s oneness and his essence. It also confirms Jesus’ oneness with the Father. By being “begotten,” Jesus is not subordinate, but one in the same with the Father. They mention the Holy Ghost, and this leaves the door open for another heresy about the Trinity. However, the Trinitarian revision does not happen until later (Brox 161). In the final part of the new Creed, the bishops condemn the Arians directly by stating that anyone who objects to these ideas is cursed by the Church. Since the Church is now held in high esteem by Constantine, one who commits heresy against the Church would also be going against the Emperor. This unity of Church and state created a new dynamic for the Christian Church. Bishops held more power and the Church was slowly creating an empire itself. This is all an effect from Constantine, who, by bringing the Church under the Empire, used it to unite Rome under his leadership.
Paul and Constantine both made significant contributions to Christianity, and the two men are also similar in a multitude of ways: (1) They were both Roman statesmen; (2) they went through a conversion experience; (3) after their conversion, each one of them attempted to spread Christianity through the Empire; (4) both of them win their ideological battles when an issue about the Christian teaching came up.

Paul, through his preaching, epistles, and belief system, spreads the message of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. However, his defining moment was his preaching to the Gentiles, and winning the argument to allow Gentiles into the faith at the Council of Jerusalem. By allowing Gentiles into the faith, Paul shaped his Christianity to fit their beliefs, making it relatable and easy to convert. Constantine did similar things for his citizens. After experiencing his conversion, Constantine embraced Christianity and allowed it to be practiced in the Empire. For Constantine however, these motives might have been aimed not toward his own spiritual salvation, but toward a larger political goal—the unification of the Roman Empire. It is famously said that the winners write the history of the world. The saying can also be applied to religion. Paul and Constantine were winners for the Christian faith as their beliefs, actions, and teachings influenced the Christianity that followed them. Constantine and Paul’s roads were the ones that the Church decided to take to form their tenants that are still practiced today.

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