

Constantine's Effect on Early Christianity

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Constantine! When you hear his name, do you think of the power and brutality of the Roman Empire, or do you think of the founding of formalized Christianity? Was Constantine good, bad, a mixture? There's evidence for each position.

Why Consider Constantine?

The Orthodox Church regards Constantine as Saint Constantine the Great. He did much for the early Christian church from 306 to 337 while he was the Roman Emperor. Constantine was the first Roman Emperor to claim conversion to Christianity. His declaration of the Edict of Milan in 313 is one of his most important early contributions. This edict declared that Christians (and all other religions) would be tolerated throughout the empire, bringing an end to religious persecution. Constantine called together the first council of Nicaea in 325 with 250 mostly Eastern bishops¹ resulting in the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith that attempted to unite disparate Christian communities.² Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at the purported site of Jesus' tomb, which became the holiest site in Christendom. During his reign, he built many basilicas, repaired churches throughout the empire, relieved clergy of some taxes, supported the Christian church financially³ and saw that Sunday was designated as a day of rest for all citizens. He promoted Christians into political offices. Constantine decided his capitol should be moved to Byzantium. He did extensive building in this city, then renamed it Constantinople. This "new city" was said to be protected by relics of the True Cross, the Rod of Moses, and other holy relics. Figures of the old gods were replaced or assimilated into Christian symbolism. Constantine himself was baptized into the Christian faith right before his death.⁴

Constantine gained political power the way most ancients did, through warfare and murder. His troops admired him and they proclaimed him as Augustus of the West at his father's death, as he served with them in Britain. Other political pretenders reduced his title to Caesar, but he ruled over Britain, Gaul, and Spain with one of the largest armies in the Roman Empire. When he captured two kings and the soldiers of the Franks, he fed them to beasts in the amphitheater in Trier. He married the daughter of a political rival, Maximian, with the promise to protect the man's son, but he was in another location, conveniently, when the man was attacked. Later he arranged for the suicide of the same rival. In another battle for dominance, Constantine painted the sign of the Christian cross on his soldiers' shields and created a battle standard with the same symbol, convinced, perhaps by a dream or vision, that this would make him victorious. Once he defeated his remaining rivals, Constantine became the sole Emperor of the Roman Empire. His final battle was permeated with religious language; Constantine

¹ Richard E Rubenstein., *When Jesus Became God*, (New York: Harcourt, 1999) 75.

² To be precise, the "Nicene Creed" was initiated in 325 but expanded in the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople 381 C.E.

³ Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 71.

⁴ This was rather typical among elites in the Christian Roman world.

represented the Christian Latin-speaking West and Licinius, his remaining rival, represented the pagan, Greek-speaking East. And yet, Constantine presented himself as a savior of the Christians in the Roman East. Along the way, Constantine also had his own son killed, along with his own wife, for reasons that are unclear but likely political.

For all his military adventures, Constantine saw himself as protector of the Christian Church and he wanted unanimity in the church. He presided over several church councils as they worked through theological questions, seeking to establish an orthodoxy over issues that threatened to divide the church, and by extension, his empire. He used the church to maintain a united social order, just as he had used Christianity to lead his soldiers to military victory. In 336, Constantine planned a war to rescue Christian Armenia, which had had a Persian placed on its throne. The campaign was to be a holy war, with bishops to accompany the troops and a church-shaped tent to follow Constantine everywhere. He became ill before this campaign could be carried out. After his death, Constantine was buried in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, a site where he had already prepared his final resting place. Constantine was certainly a powerful military figure and he had much involvement in the early church. Did he “save the church?” Would we still have a Christian church if Constantine had not come onto the scene?

Perhaps the answer to that question depends on which kind of Christianity we’re considering. There were many Christianities that arose after Jesus’ death, and they did meet different fates.

Christianity in Jerusalem

John Dominic Crossan has studied the historical Jesus extensively, placing him squarely in the context of the first century eastern Mediterranean world in which he lived. Archeology, history, and cross-cultural studies all help to reveal Jesus’ world. It was a world dominated by the Roman Empire, a world in which the Jews saw that the land given to them by God was being appropriated for commercial farming through high taxes levied on impoverished peasants. Some Jews lost their lands to debt and became day laborers. Some had to sell children into slavery to have sufficient resources for the rest of their families. Crossan said, “In any situation of oppression, especially in these oblique, indirect, and systematic ones where injustice wears a mask of normalcy or even of necessity, the only ones who are innocent or blessed are those squeezed out deliberately as human junk from the system’s own evil operations.”⁵ Thus, the poor Jews were “blessed,” although they surely didn’t feel like it. Jesus used parables to help people see beyond his culture’s “normal,” to see the world as God would have it, a world in which caring for each other with compassion and equality would bring the Kingdom of God to them, right there where they lived.

Jesus modelled this world. He ate with anyone who chose to eat with him, disregarding cultural taboos. Crossan commented, “Open commensality is the symbol and embodiment of radical egalitarianism, of an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them.”⁶

⁵John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (NY :HarperCollins, 1994) 70.

⁶ Ibid, 79.

Jesus healed the sick. Crossan said, “A cure for the disease is absolutely desirable, but in its absence, we can still heal the illness by refusing to ostracize those who have it, by empathizing with their anguish, and by enveloping their sufferings with both respect and love.”⁷ Crossan interpreted Jesus’ activities as revolutionary. “What Jesus was doing is located exactly on the borderline between the covert and the overt arts of resistance...His eating and healing were, in theory and practice, the precise borderline between private and public, covert and overt, secret and open resistance.”⁸

Jesus asked his followers to continue his work of bringing about the Kingdom of God. He was itinerant, wandering the countryside offering his alternative vision of a life of compassion and sharing. He asked his followers to go out into the countryside to share his vision with others. “They (his followers) are rural on a house mission to rebuild peasant society from the grass roots upward. Since commensality is not just a technique for support but a demonstration of message, they could not and should not dress to indicate itinerant self-sufficiency but rather communal dependency. Itinerancy and dependency: heal, stay, move on.”⁹

Cossan cited the *Gospel of Thomas* to indicate what happened soon after Jesus’ death. “The Gospel of Thomas...uses only one title for Jesus. He is ‘the living Jesus’ who acts yesterday, today, and tomorrow as the Wisdom of God here on earth, and his missionaries participate in that divine Wisdom by how they live, not just by how they talk. They do not speak of resurrection, but of unbroken and abiding presence.”¹⁰

Stephen Patterson felt that both the Gospel of Thomas and the Q Gospel are very early Christian documents. They both present the sayings of Jesus, indicating that Jesus was seen as a wisdom teacher early on. Q was embedded in Matthew and Luke and took on their concerns about resistance to the suppression of their culture and their appreciation of martyrdom. According to Patterson, Thomas probably was written in Edessa in Eastern Syria, beyond the Roman Empire, and was not concerned with martyrdom but was interested in the wisdom Jesus taught.¹¹

Early Jesus-Followers in Jerusalem mourned Jesus’ death and wondered how a messiah could be crucified as a common criminal. James, the brother of Jesus, became the leader of the Jesus Followers in Jerusalem. Jesus’ Followers felt he had been resurrected – if Roman emperors could be taken up into Heaven, surely Jesus could, too -- and his resurrection was the first of many that would follow as “the Saints” rose to a fitting reward for their faithfulness.¹² They expected that Jesus would return soon and then act as a Messiah.¹³

Some of the Jesus Followers sensed Jesus’ continuing presence with them and continued his work in the countryside. Others developed communities centered in house churches to live shared lives of concern and care for each other. In a time when there were no social services for

⁷ Ibid, 92.

⁸ Ibid, 118.

⁹ Ibid, 133.

¹⁰ Ibid, 183.

¹¹ Stephen Patterson. *The Lost Way, How Gospels Are Rewriting the Story of Christian Origins*, (NY: HarperOne, 2014) 116-117.

¹² John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*, (NY: HarperCollins, 2001) 206.

¹³ Barrie Wilson. *How Jesus Became Christian*, (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2008) 100.

the poor, shared meals and care were attractions for the lower classes in Jerusalem, but these weekly gatherings gave evidence that some wealthy people provided the food for the common meals.¹⁴ Jesus Followers expected Jesus to return to Jerusalem to continue God's Kingdom on earth.

They faced stresses as they followed "The Way"¹⁵ Jesus had taught, in the midst of people who didn't accept Jesus' practical theology. But Jesus' subtle resistance wasn't enough, and a Jewish rebellion began in the mid-60's. James was killed by a high priest in 62; he was so important and loved in Jerusalem that protests erupted and the high priest was removed.¹⁶ Jerusalem's Jesus Followers fled or were killed by the time the temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. They scattered into Pella in the Decapolis region, Alexandria in Egypt, and Antioch in Syria – cities that had substantial Jewish populations.¹⁷ There is speculation that the Ebionites were successors to the Jesus Movement.¹⁸ They remained devout Jews, waiting for the holy and righteous human Jesus to return, while living with Jesus' teaching. Some early Christians returned to the Jewish faith, but others carried the message of the Jesus Followers with them, making accommodations to their new homes' cultures. The earliest Jerusalem branch of Christianity died because of war and exile, long before Constantine was born.

Christianity in Rome

There were two rival and parallel movements in the 60's: the Jesus Movement in Israel and the Christ Movement in the Diaspora.¹⁹ Paul had never met the historical Jesus. Paul honored the mystical experience of Christ he had undergone on the road to Damascus. According to Barrie Wilson, Paul "received and conveyed a message no one in the Jesus Movement had ever heard or expressed. As a result, his beliefs differed, as did his practices."²⁰ Paul focused on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and gave little attention to Jesus' words or actions, which had taken place only a decade before Paul's activity. Paul's "Christianity" was especially interested in the martyr myth associated with Jesus, whom he called the Christ. Paul's Christ Movement caught on and spread rapidly. Capturing the God-fearer segment from synagogues was a highly successful maneuver. These spiritual seekers responded eagerly to Paul's message that they could have all the benefits of Judaism without many of its legal obligations.^{21,22}

Whoever wrote in the name of Jesus' brother, James, felt that people who wanted to follow Jesus should follow Jewish dietary and purity laws. Paul knew that requirement would discourage pagans from ever becoming Christian – what pagan man would voluntarily undergo circumcision? He also was principally concerned with the work that Jesus had done as God's

¹⁴ Sheila McGinn. *The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church*, (Winona, Minn: Anselm Academic, 2014) 81.

¹⁵ In Acts, Luke calls the followers of Jesus "Followers of the Way," according to McGinn, p. 41.

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan. *The Birth of Christianity*, 464.

¹⁷ Sheila McGinn. *The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church*, 102.

¹⁸ Barrie Wilson. *How Jesus Became Christian*, 99-101.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 134.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 134.

²¹ Richard E Rubenstein. *When Jesus Became Christ*, 136.

²² This is not to overlook the fact that Paul did not have stipulations. Some progressive, care for the poor and cautious (non-rash) speaking; some conservative, mandatory heterosexuality and monogamy.

anointed one. The Law, he believed, always pointed out what it was attempting to prohibit, “Apart from the law sin lies dead” (Rom. 7:8). He wanted to acknowledge that the Jewish dietary laws were holy and good, but they always invited transgression. Life in the “spirit,” for Paul, was the spontaneous cause of good in the community without the Law, which pointed out what it was seeking to avoid. Doing good because one’s spirit is transformed, for Paul, was better than doing good because of the Law. While this wouldn’t be a fair analysis of the many Jewish groups of the time (Christianity was also one!), rhetoric in the ancient world is not interested in honest assessment – it is interested in persuasion. James and Paul had a conference about these issues, and they basically agreed to disagree, but amicably... or so they thought. This agreement was tested and became the precipitating occasion for Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Unfortunately, we never really learn what James’ and Peter’s positions were. We are left with only Paul’s side of the issue and perhaps a faint echo of James’ position in the letter later attributed to him.

John Dominic Crossan in a conference speech at Earlham College April 16-17, 2010, said that there are three versions of “Paul” in the Bible. The first Paul comes from his actual letters to Christian groups he founded in Syria and Greece, found in the New Testament. These letters contain his radical ideas – a Christian couldn’t own a Christian slave, and women were equal to men in the church and could have authority there. A later admirer writing in Paul’s name expressed conservative ideas in letters to Colossians and Ephesians, including rules for how an owner should treat a Christian slave and rules for husbands and their submissive wives. And the last writings attributed to Paul gave Christian slaves rules to obey concerning their masters and told women to be quiet, to cover their heads, and to not think of leadership in the church. Over the years as Christians became more noticeable in the culture, Paul’s ideas became less revolutionary and more accommodating to the surrounding culture. His message “softened,” as demonstrated by his recommendations for women in the church, moving from radical inclusion to the second class status found in the culture. Still, the churches Paul and other early missionaries founded kept the ideas of baptism as a means for becoming a Christian, house churches for weekly remembrance and worship, high moral standards, weekly common meals to be shared with others, and charity and help for the poor. Christians sometimes worshipped and ate in the catacombs under Rome or in areas near tombs of their loved ones and “saints.”²³ Paul’s converts didn’t wander the country carrying Jesus’ message, but they did continue the practices Jesus had taught.

Paul and other early missionaries were effective. Jesus died in the early 30’s. There were Christian communities in Rome by the late 40’s – The Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 “because of disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, “Christ?”²⁴ There were Christians in Damascus before Paul’s conversion (he was “pursuing” them) and in Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria, soon after. It is important to note that there were other “missionaries” that relayed a “Christ message” that was rather different than Paul’s and Peter’s. Apollos, mentioned in 1 Corinthians, appears to be one such figure. Indeed, the Corinthian correspondence indicates a Paul that was writing *as if* he was the father of the community – though this was likely rhetorical, not historical.

²³ Graydon Synder. *Ante Pacem: Archeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003) 301.

²⁴ John Dominic Crossan. *The Birth of Christianity*, 416.

By the 50's, there were Christian communities in four Roman provinces in present day Turkey and Greece. Paul's letters to these communities gave evidence of churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Corinth, Damascus, Antioch, and Jerusalem.²⁵ Certainly missionary work was challenging, with opposition from Jewish religious leaders and even from Gentiles. In Ephesus silversmiths who made statues to the Goddess Diana rioted against Christian evangelists, because conversions to Christianity led to smaller orders for their products. The growing body of Christians were having an economic impact, at least for those who serviced the pagan temples. And Pliny wrote that "Christian numbers were large enough to damage pagan economy and society. They also spread across rank, age, sex, and location."²⁶

When Paul wrote to the leaders of Christian churches in the late 50's, he wrote to an established community where he knew 29 leaders by name.²⁷ Within 25 years after Jesus' death, the Christian Movement had spread through the eastern Mediterranean. However, we should note that these "Christ centered" movements might not have meant the same thing by this "Christ." Paul's detractors and seemingly minority status suggest that his Gospel was rather innovative. Paul didn't just "pass on tradition," rather, he adapted it for his own purposes and his own vision. He combined apocalyptic expectation (e.g., Daniel 7 & 12; 1 Thessalonians) with the death and resurrection of Jesus (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15). This was a stunning move and Paul was likely singularly responsible for it. Our earliest traditions in Q lack any such connection. It seems Mark's Gospel takes some of Paul's declarations and historicizes them. Indeed, Paul never mentions an empty tomb story, nor does Q. Paul has a memorial meal tradition in 1 Corinthians 11 which Mark transforms into an historical narrative. These changes in the "Christ tradition" (as opposed to the Jesus sayings tradition) were shocking. Paul was masterful in stamping his own mark on this tradition, and Mark historicized it. Paul indeed is singular in his influence on what becomes the "Christian movement" in the second to fourth centuries.

In the late 60's, the Roman Emperor Nero persecuted Christians, likely to deflect blame for the burning of Rome. Christians were accused of cannibalism (the communion ritual), sexual immorality (meals at private homes among "brothers" and "sisters"), and atheism (snubbing the ancient gods to worship a mortal.)²⁸ Nero's persecution lasted about a year and involved only Romans.

After the Jewish wars in the 70's, Christians had to adjust to several things; the loss of the first generation Christians who knew Jesus, the loss of the center of control in Jerusalem (if this is historical – there is a reasonable chance that this is a Lukan invention), the separation from Jewish religious communities, and the realization that Jesus *wasn't* coming back to take them to heaven soon. Sheila McGinn noted, "By the time the household codes for Colossians and Ephesians were penned, circumstances had changed such that a critical mass of aristocratic men had started to join the communities of Christ-believers."²⁹

As more aristocrats joined the church, they applied some pressure to accommodate to the structures and mores of Roman society. Many Christians resisted this as a betrayal of Jesus' life and teaching. Ultimately it led to the adoption of ecclesial structures that copied Rome's

²⁵ Ibid, ix-x.

²⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 6.

²⁷ Sheila McGinn. *The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church*, 111

²⁸ Ibid, 165.

²⁹ Ibid, 198.

political organization and titles.³⁰ By the middle of the second century, most Romanized churches had bishops as leaders. The Roman church was developing a patriarchal model of church government, with the most important (male) leader representing the unquestioned father of the church “family.”³¹

Christianity in Egypt

According to legend, the gospel author Mark brought Christianity to Egypt in 42 C.E. He was said to be the founder and first bishop of the church in Alexandria. Pagans threatened Mark, so he fled. Two years later, he came back to find a thriving church there. Pagans were furious at Mark for his role in this and Mark was martyred. In 828, Mark’s bones were smuggled out of Alexandria and installed in St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice.³²

Egyptian Christians suffered under Diocletian’s persecution, just as people in Rome did. Churches were razed and believers were killed, but the faith continued to grow. Many Egyptian churches are named after these martyrs. There was relief when Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan

Egypt became a Christian state in 393. During the fourth and fifth centuries, there were many conversions. The concepts of resurrection and the afterlife were familiar to Egyptians and the call of Christianity for morality and good manners was familiar to Egyptians. Alexandria became the center of Christian philosophy because of its university. Its 20th bishop Athanasius had an important role in Constantine’s Nicaean Council in 325.³³

Many monasteries were founded in Egypt. They required vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the abbot. Some members probably joined because monasteries were sure sources of housing and food, but the monasteries were often self-supporting and they had tasks for everyone.

Gradon Snyder found a papyrus letter which had been sent from Christians in Rome to the “brethren” in Alexandria in the mid 200’s. The man writing the letter was giving directions regarding some sales that had been made. Apparently the bishops handled the money for the Christian community. The bishop was called “Papa,” showing that Christians in Egypt structured their religious communities like extended families.³⁴ In a letter from a son to his mother from the early third century, the boy asked for his coat to be sent to him before the Feast of Easter.³⁵ Christian holidays were well established by then. While Christianity was once the dominant religion in Egypt, only about 10% of Egyptians are Coptic Christians now.

Christianity in Syria and Turkey

³⁰ Ibid, 265.

³¹ Ibid, 284.

³² Ahmed Osman. “The Origins of the Ancient Coptic Church of Egypt,” *Classical Wisdom Weekly*, 18 December 2014.

³³ Abdel-Rahman Shereif. “The Emergence of Christianity in Egypt,” dailynewsegypt.com/2013/06/19/the-emergence-of-christianity-in-egypt/33.

³⁴ Gradon Snyder. *Ante Pacem: Archeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine*, 276-7.

³⁵ Ibid, 278.

One evidence of growth in the early Christian community was the writing of *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, or Didache*. This late first century or early second century work from Syria was an instruction manual for Christian life. The first part was a catechism. Next was a section for the proper ways to do eating, baptism, fasting, praying, and eucharistizing. A third section dealt with regulations for testing various classes of visitors (apparently the communities were getting some “hangers on.”). And finally there were closing apocalyptic appeals. Crossan felt this document was needed to be sure new converts, especially former pagans, would have uniformity in practices so the community could live together in peace.³⁶ In this document, women were still accepted as leaders in the church and community. Itinerant prophets, apostles, and teachers were regarded with some suspicion and had to prove their legitimacy by what they did, not what they said. Their lives had to reflect the life of Jesus, for them to be taken seriously. But, as in the “layers” of Paul’s writing, the earlier layers of the *Didache* were more demanding than later ones, which conceded, “Do what you can.”

Around 110, the Emperor Trajan appointed a new governor to Bithynia, now part of Turkey. That governor, Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan for advice on how to handle the Christ-believers there. Pliny said he asked suspects three times if they were Christians, and if they didn’t deny it he would execute them. But anonymous sources were starting to accuse neighboring Christians of all sorts of crimes. When Pliny investigated he found that the Christ-believers’ practice was “to meet together before it was light and to sing a song to Christ, as to a god...and to oblige themselves by a sacrament (or oath) not to do anything that was ill; but that they would commit no theft, or pilfering, or adultery; that they would not break their promises, or deny what was deposited with them, when it was required back again; after which it was their custom to depart, and to meet again at a common but innocent meal, which they had left off upon that edict which I published at your command and wherein I had forbidden any such conventicles.”³⁷ Pliny said these cases were flooding the courts, which could hardly handle the load. He thought the Christians were simply excessively superstitious, though they were coming from all levels of society. But, at the same time, the Christians refused to buy meat for pagan sacrifices, and the land-owners were suffering economically. Socially, the Christians were avoiding the pagan temples, so they were becoming isolated from normal society.³⁸ Clearly, the numbers of Christians were growing here, too.

Within about five years, Ignatius of Antioch was arrested and sent to Rome for trial. He identified himself as a bishop who was to be martyred “for the Name.” On the way to Rome, he met with leaders of other churches, including bishops who had been elected by their church communities. He urged them to establish a permanent leadership structure of one bishop over several deacons over some presbyters, for each community, with bishops having contact with each other. The church in Syria was becoming more formally organized.³⁹ But Ignatius’ recommendations for a hierarchical church leadership doesn’t jibe with *The Didache*’s respect for prophets. The Syrian church seemed split on how leadership should be formed. Today, Christians in Syria and Turkey are under siege by Islamic extremists. Perhaps 10% of the population remains Christian.

³⁶John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 366.

³⁷Sheila McGinn. *The Jesus Movement and the Early Church*, 270.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 270-1.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 276-281.

Did Constantine “Save” Christianity?

From the information above, it is clear that Christianity developed well throughout the Mediterranean in the three centuries before Constantine. There were periods of persecution. Often, brave Christian martyrs expanded pagan respect for Christianity with an accompanying growth of Christian communities. The communities themselves were attractions for people who wanted to help others or people who needed help. They were instrumental in the growth of social services for people who had had no other place to turn. Thus Christianity provided a new religion of hope *and* a system of compassionate social services. Its appeal continues, with the recent rapid growth of Christian communities in Africa and South America.

Christianity had a system of organization before Constantine. Bishops, chosen by the Christian community, were in place, as was a network of communication between these bishops. Rituals and practices had been developed and spread before Constantine intervened.

And yet Constantine’s patronage of Christianity certainly was helpful. It decreased or eliminated the persecution of Christians, gave them more structured leadership, and provided places to worship. It also helped in the elimination of competing religions, as Rome turned from the freedom to worship many gods to the worship of one God. Constantine’s emphasis on unity in belief, expressed in creeds, reduced the arguments between churches. But did it *save* Christianity?

If it did, it saved Christianity at great cost. The life and teaching of Jesus were subsumed in creeds that scarcely mention him. The equality he lived for was lost in a hierarchy of sometimes dictatorial religious leadership. His simplicity yielded to elaborate vestments and rituals. And, yet, we wouldn’t have the Gospels today without him. His patronage provided a professional scribal class, far superior to the lower ranking scribes or copyists of the previous centuries. With Constantine the New Testament was codified and other texts eliminated. Consider this: what persecuted religion in the first millennium C.E. ever survived without imperial support? Manichaeism? No. Mandaeanism? No. Mithras? No. The list goes on. Indeed, if we reflect on the regions that were lost to Roman control – Syria, the Levant, Egypt, Mesopotamia – we see that Christianity is just a small minority. While such a truth is uncomfortable in terms of peace and conflict, it is something that needs to be grappled with. The attitude of peace Jesus promoted has been lost in wars and hatred supported by imperial “Christians” – and yet without imperial support, history suggests that most Christians today would not be Christian but some other form of imperially backed faith. The question before Christians today is: Can we redeem this past. Can we retroactively make amends of the failures of the Church? Can something be both saved and lost? Barrie Wilson comments that “It is especially ironic that a movement that started off as a radical challenge to the Pax Romana succeeded in becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire.”⁴⁰ Stephen Patterson expresses dismay at Constantine’s role in Christianity. “Since the moment Constantine made the cross his personal talisman, the sign under which his troops would always win, the cross has been the symbol of both martyrdom and murder. Soldiers’ declaration that they are willing to

⁴⁰Barrie Wilson. *How Jesus Became Christian*, 255.

die for the cause always also buys them a license to kill for it.”⁴¹ John Dominic Crossan reports that “Constantine, wanting a unified Christianity as the empire’s new religion, ordered the Christian bishops to meet, under imperial subsidy, in lakeside Nicaea, southeast of Constantinople, and there erase any major theological disagreements between them.”⁴² Bodyguards and troops surrounded the entrance of the palace where they met, and the bishops were basically prisoners until they could form a creed they could all sign. And yet, without this creed, what would this faith look like, without the dogma of Christ’s uncreated divinity? What of the co-equal divinity of the Holy Spirit? Could we still call this “Christianity”? Perhaps yes, perhaps no... This indeed is a task for a Church in pursuit of peace amidst a world of conflict. In addressing Constantine’s banquet at the Council of Nicaea’s conclusion, Crossan said:

The meal and the Kingdom still come together, but now the participants are the male bishops, and they recline with the Emperor himself, to be served by others. Maybe, Christianity is an invisible and absolutely necessary “betrayal” of Jesus, else it might have died among the hills of Lower Galilee. But did that “betrayal” have to happen so swiftly, succeed so fully, and be enjoyed so thoroughly? Might not a more even dialectic have been maintained between Jesus and Christ in Jesus Christ?⁴³

Might we redeem this past? Might we go back and do it over? That is, can we deconstruct our constructions in search of the peasant sage, Jesus of Nazareth? Can Jesus of Nazareth confront the Christ of faith? What would the historical Jesus think when put before the great icons of Christ in the city of Rome or Constantinople?

Constantine’s Christian burial is seen as inappropriate to Crossan. He comments: The great irony and tragedy was this. The one who rebelled in every way against a Roman-backed commercial kingdom in Galilee, Jesus the Jewish peasant, was now Christ the Imperial King. To build a regal burial place for the Jewish Jesus, Constantine cut away the *kokhim* shafts or *arcosolia* shelves of a Jewish tomb beyond any recognition. But over time, Christianity also cut away any and forgot the Jewish roots of its covenantal Kingdom.⁴⁴

Perhaps with Constantine’s preservation of the deutero-Paul’s Christianity, we lost Jesus. Might we call Christians today to pursue the radical egalitarianism of the historical Paul and the brokerless kingdom that Jesus spoke of?

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⁴¹ Stephen Patterson. *The Lost Way*, 40.

⁴²John Dominic Crossan. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 225.

⁴³John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, 424.

⁴⁴John Dominic Crossan and Timothy Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*, 267.

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