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THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY

The Fourth Century – Part II

Rev. Karel Coppock

I. CONVERSION OF ARMENIA AND GEORGIA

ARMENIA

Here's the story of the conversion of Armenia and Georgia. First Armenia. We've often been told that it was the first Christian nation. In weeks past we saw that there were two others including Edessa, north of Syria and Adiabene (a part of Iraq), around 200 A.D. which preceded it. Perhaps because it was larger and more powerful and still exists today as a Christian nation, it retains, nevertheless a right to special status.

The man who was responsible for the conversion of Armenia was named **Gregory the Illuminator or Enlightener. He was born in 257.** Gregory's father **Anak** was a **Parthian**, a nomadic people which conquered and ruled **Persia** for centuries before being defeated and thrown out by native Sassanid Persians who ruled the Persian Empire for 400 years from from 224 to 651 when the armies of Islam over-ran it. The Parthians in their time were the main opponents of the Romans; their empire covering much of eastern Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Parthia was never conquered by Rome. The Parthians were known as intrepid horsemen who would sweep in upon an army inflicting a hail of arrows as it came, and then retreat shooting arrows backwards at their pursuers as they rode. Because of the strength and power of this army the countries on the border between Rome and Parthia would swing back and forth in their allegiance. And so it was with Armenia. Sometimes Armenia was allied with Rome, sometimes with the Parthians. Anyway, Saint Gregory's Parthian father Anak who was not as saintly as his son, became involved in court intrigues, and for political reasons assassinated the King of Armenia. Anak was captured and killed, but Gregory's mother escaped with two sons to Cappodocia on the wouthern coast of Turkey. There Gregory came under the tutelage of a teacher in the Christian faith. In 287 A.D., when Gregory was 30 years old, the son of the murdered King of Armenia, **Tiridates III, who had been raised in Rome under Diocletian's tutelage, returned to Armenia, took the throne from the Persians,** and tracked Gregory down, brought him back to Armenia. There he **threw Gregory into a pit,** where, the story goes, he remained for 10 years. This was near Mt Ararat.

He had lots of time to pray—this was a time when the life of the hermit was revered--and soon Gregory became widely known for his holiness and, if we can extrapolate from the lives of other hermits and from the request from the court of Armenia subsequently, for healings occuring among those who would visit him. Well the king was found to be in distress of some kind, so, in **297,** Gregory was taken out of the pit, restored and invited to minister to the same

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king who had thrown him into the pit. The king was healed. Tiridates III converted to Christianity and was baptized along with his whole court. The country officially adopted Christianity in 301. **Gregory died in 331. He is the patron saint of Armenia.**

Incidentally, at a **World Vision** Christian Witness conference in Federal Way last week we heard the testimony of the director of Christian Witness for the Eastern European area which comprises, among other countries, Armenia. He told us how Stalinism had all but wiped out the church in Armenia—after already having endured the holocaust by Turks and Kurds in the early 20th century when 2 million were killed; and how World Vision has worked with the Armenian church leaders to produce Biblical materials and stories to once again teach the Armenians their own Christian story and faith; and how that Biblical material is being used in all Armenian schools today.

GEORGIA

The story of the conversion of Georgia involves a Christian woman, but this one, not of noble birth, but a household slave. It is a reminder of how God has often used prayer and healing, signs and wonders, to convert people to Him and does so still today. It is also exemplary of how whole nations converted, through their rulers. The woman's name was Nina, or Nino (c. 296 – c. 338 or 340)

This is what happened. Georgia at the time was known confusingly as **Iberia**. A certain young woman who was a Christian, was captured and brought to Iberia or Georgia as a slave. This girl, **Nina, or Nino**, was deeply committed to Christ, and, unlike the women around her, never drank. Her virtue was exemplary. She prayed ceaselessly. Fasted often. Georgians who knew her began to take note. Women in particular wanted to know about her faith. They were curious. So she told them about Christ. Then one day, one of these women's children got sick.

“It is said to be a custom among them that if a child falls ill, it is carried round by its mother to each individual household, so that if anyone knows of some trustworthy remedy, he may administer it to the sufferer. Accordingly, when (this mother) had carried her ailing child to everyone, as the custom was, but without finding any cure in all the homes she had visited, she came at last to the captive--Nina--so that she too might declare anything she knew. Nina affirmed that she knew of no human remedy, but assured the mother that her God Christ, whom she worshiped could grant the child (healing). Placing the infant on her hair cloak and offering up a prayer to the Lord, Nina then gave the child to its mother perfectly restored” (St. Nina).

This healing reached the ears of the queen whose name was **Nana**, who was desperately ill. She asked for the captive woman to be brought to her, but Nina declined to go, apparently, because she didn't feel it was fitting. So the queen had herself carried to her room. Nina prayed, and, the queen was healed. She told the Queen that it was Christ who had healed her, and that she should begin to pray to Him, thanking him for what he had done as King of Kings. Queen Nana shared what had happened to her husband **Mirian III** of Iberia. He wanted to

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reward Nina with princely gifts, but, was told Nina would accept none of this, that the only thing she wanted was that the King and Queen worship Christ as Lord. Well, the king promptly forgot about it.

Some time later while he was hunting in the forest, day light was clouded over in some kind of dense fog, the King became separated from his retainers and he began to panic. He didn't know what to do. Then he remembered his wife's healing and began to wonder if Christ might be able to help him. He told himself that if he did, he'd worship him as Lord of all.

No sooner had he thought this than the dark fog disappeared, his panic subsided, and he made his way safely home. He talked to his wife about it, summoned Nina to his palace, and began taking instruction in the Christian faith. He had a church built and as monarch, adopted Christianity as the official religion. Georgia, of course, is Christian to this day. And it might be added, both Armenia and Georgia have withstood horrendous attempts by Muslim conquerors in centuries to come such as Tamerlane to force them to accept Islam.

[Here is a picture of Samtavro Church in Armenia where King Mirian III and his Queen Nana were buried.]

II. THE LAST ROMAN PERSECUTION

But let us return to Christianity in the Greco-Roman Empire, for it is there that momentous events were about to occur that would affect Christianity to the end of time. For the remainder of the class, I'd like to review them. They may be subsumed under three chapters:

- Persecution under Diocletian and Galerius
- The Conversion of Constantine

PERSECUTION

The church by the beginning of the 4th century had been enjoying peace and prosperity. Many had forgotten there was a problem at all. Even the borders of the Empire were relatively secure. **The emperor, Diocletian's wife and daughter were both Christians.** But there were problems in the army. In 295, a number of Christians were condemned to death for refusing to enlist. Others were executed for trying to leave. The Church's attitude was ambivalent. Should Christians use the sword and fight or not? To be sure he didn't have a fifth column abandoning the fight, Galerius, the commander of the army of the Danube where Goths were raiding, and the man Diocletian had appointed to follow him when he would abdicate, something he promised to do...this Galerius, an emperor in waiting, convinced the emperor Diocletian to kick out all Christians from the armed forces. His next step was to convince Diocletian to kick Christians out of all administrative posts in the empire—and Christians occupied a lot of them. This was between 298-302 A.D.

Galerius didn't like Christians. But it was still Diocletian himself who was the power in Rome. So a word must be said about him. Diocletian reigned for 21 years. He was a dour and autocratic man who surrounded his person and his throne with heavy religious trappings. When anyone approached him, they were required to prostrate themselves three times, and call him "Lord". Because of the battles on the frontiers—with Saxon pirates in the northwest;

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Goths crossing the Danube in the north; Parthians and Sassanid Persians in the east, and Berbers in north Africa, he set about building vast fortifications, so that the Roman empire began to resemble a fortified camp (page Frend, 452). He rebuilt cities. Contemporaries thought his building campaigns a “mania”. **[See picture of his imperial palace in Split, Croatia on the Dalmatian coast]**. His autocratic nature led him to project an astonishing regimentation throughout the empire. He made vast lists of anything that might be sold with a maximum price for each and the exact tax for each item. He destroyed any coinage other than his own.

Why he began a concerted, well planned persecution against Christians is not clear. Was it because of a fire that broke out in the imperial palace? Some conjecture that it Galerius who set it. We can't know for sure, though that was the rumor floating around. Whatever the case, when official persecution of Christians broke out in earnest, it was well planned by both Diocletian and Galerius who published a joint decree on **23 of February 303** ordering the destruction of all churches and the burning of all Christian books. It was immediately put into effect. The first Christians in Carthage knew that the decree had been made was when they woke that morning to discover their church in flames.

This persecution came as a great shock. Christians were town counselors; they were educated like everyone else. They held important civic posts. They were teachers, and so on, fully integrated into the life of the empire. Their bishops were respected leaders of towns and cities. But Diocletian's edict was immediately carried out. Everywhere churches were destroyed. Then in the **Summer of 303**, all bishops were arrested and commanded to sacrifice to the emperor. **Nearly all refused**. Many were tortured and put to death. Some escaped over the border into Persia. Many went into hiding. The only area where there was relative peace was in Gaul, Spain, and England where they were protected by Constantine's (we'll hear more about him in a minute) father, the military governor of that area.

At this point, Diocletian abdicated, as he had promised to do, and **Galerius** took over what part of the empire he could. Civil war broke out on all sides between the four co-emperors now reigning. But against the church, all out war was declared. In the East, in Egypt, Carthage, and Italy, Galerius inflicted terrible suffering on the Church: Christians were maimed and sent to work in stone quarries. There they organized Churches which only enraged the authorities more who had them deported or killed. Churches were commanded to hand over their scriptures. **The laity in turn was commanded to sacrifice as well**. “Have you handed over the scriptures?” one young Christian was asked. “I have them engraved upon my heart!” he answered (Frend, p. 462).

Here is a record of one conversation between government officials and Christian leaders of a church in Cirta, a town in what is now Libya.

“In the eighth and seventh consulships of Diocletian and Maximian, 19th May, from the records of Munatius Felix, high priest of the province for life, mayor of the colony of Cirta. Arrived at the house where the Christians used to meet, the Mayor said to Paul the bishop: 'Bring out the writings of the law and anything else you have here, according to the order, so that you may obey the command.'”

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The bishop: "The readers have the scriptures, but we will give what we have here."

The Mayor: "Point out the readers or send for them."

The Bishop: "You all know them."

The Mayor: "We do not know them."

The Bishop: "The municipal office knows them, that is, the clerks Edusius and Junius."

The Mayor: "Leaving over the matter of the readers, whom the office will point out, produce what you have."

The follows an inventory of the church plate and other property, including large stores of male and female clothes and shoes, produced in the presence of the clergy, who include three priests, two deacons, and four subdeacons, all named, and a number of 'diggers.'

The Mayor: "Bring out what you have."

Silvanus and Carosus (two of the subdeacons): "We have thrown out everything that was here."

The Mayor: "Your answer is entered on the record."

After some empty cupboards had been found in the library, Silvanus then produced a silver box and a silver lamp, which he said he had found behind a barrel.

Victor (the mayor's clerk): "You would have been a dead man if you hadn't found them."

The Mayor: "Look more carefully in case there is anything left here."

Silvanus: "there is nothing left. We have thrown everything out."

And when the dining-room was opened, there were found there four bins and six barrels.

The Mayor: "Bring out the scriptures that you have so that we can obey the orders and command of the emperors."

Catullinus (another subdeacon) produced one very large volume.

The Mayor: "Why have you given one volume only? Produce the scriptures that you have."

Marcuclius and Catullinus (two subdeacons): "we haven't any more, because we are subdeacons; the readers have the books."

The Mayor: "Show me the readers."

Marcuclius and Catullinus: "We don't know where they live."

The Mayor: "If you don't know where they live, tell me their names."

Marcuclius and Catullinus: "We are not traitors: here we are, order us to be killed."

The Mayor: "Put them under arrest." (Frend, page 459)

This persecution under **Diocletian and Galerius** was undoubtedly the worst and most widespread persecution thus far, lasting some 13 years. **Finally in 311**, some relief came. Galerius became sick with a painful disease, and quite possibly thinking it was God getting

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back at him for the death of so many Christians, reversed his policy and issued an edict of toleration. He wrote:

“Moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it has seemed just to us to extend to Christians our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order. ..In return for our tolerance, Christians will be required to pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace.”

He died 5 days later. That left the Church with a precarious and un-enforced peace, many many churches destroyed, many Christians still in jail or in hard labor, and four warring co-emperors ruling over four different parts of the the empire. Three of these men, Licinius, Constantine, and Maximinus recognized each other's rule of different parts of the empire, but a fourth, **Maxentius** who ruled in Rome, they considered a usurper. What happened next changed the world forever.

III. CONSTANTINE (27 February 272 – 22 May 337)

The emperor/general who ruled over Spain, Gaul and Britain, **Constantine**, who, as we have said, did not enforce Diocletian's edicts against the church, gathered his armies for a surprise attack on **Maxentius**. He crossed the Alps and marched on Rome, taking unprepared strongholds as he came. He gathered his armies to fight Maxentius outside the walls of Rome. Maxentius, who would have been well advised to stay within the walls of Rome, consulted his augurs who told him to go out and fight, which he prepared to do the next day. There are at least four versions of what happened next. Here is one: the night before the battle, Constantine had a vivid dream. In it was a **Chi Rho**, the first two letters of Christ's name in Greek; X R. A voice instructed him to paint this sign on his men's shields, and with it to conquer. Eusebius tells another tale, that he said, he heard directly from the emperor himself, that as he was marching to battle the next day, he saw a cross over the sun in the sky with the words beneath: “In this sign conquer”.

Whatever the case, at the **Battle of the Milvian Bridge** that day, Constantine's army won a decisive victory. Maxentius, in the midst of the fighting, was thrown by his horse into the Tiber River while attempting a retreat, and was drowned. And Constantine became sole emperor of the western half of the Empire. **The date was October 28, 312 A.D.**

Was Constantine a Christian at this date? Probably not. He continued to worship the **Unconquered Sun** for some time after this date. But he also began calling himself the bishop of bishops began responding to requests by the Church involving internal disputes, taking a more and more important role in the Church's affairs. What is important at this *early* date, however, is that, together with one of his two remaining co-emperors, Licinius, whom he met at Milan, an Edict of Toleration, called, the **Edict of Milan**, was issued, which gave complete freedom to the Church to worship as it pleased, restore buildings to them, release their prisoners from jail, return their books and any other objects belonging to them at no cost. The date was **313 A.D.** I can't find a month and day. Under one of Constantine's rivals in the east, Maximinus, persecution of the Church continued apace. But in time, Maximinus died,

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Constantine moved against Licinius, defeated him, and by the **year 324** he was the **sole ruler of the Empire**. By that time his policies with regard to the Church were becoming more and more favorable to such an extent that he donated a palace in Rome to the Church, and began to **dream of re-building the Glory of the Roman Empire upon the foundation of the Christian Faith**. The old Roman Senate was not happy about this, so Constantine simply moved his capitol eastward, and built a new city, a new Rome, destined to become of the greatest in the empire and for a thousand years the capitol of Byzantium: **Constantinople**, the city that we call Istanbul, Turkey today. Constantine robbed pagan sanctuaries of their gods and set them up as ornaments in his new city, in this way, willingly or not, stripping away some of the power and prestige of Pagan religion in the Empire. These venerated gods had just become ornamentation. And if his whole life he continued to exercise his functions as chief priest of the Pagan religion and as an adept of the Unconquered Sun, he could do so, because, astutely, he never accepted baptism or instruction in the Christian Faith, that is, never declared himself a true follower of Christ, until his deathbed, so that he could continue to offer sacrifices to the gods as someone who was favorable to Christianity, but not yet quite a Christian, and therefore not really under the authority of the Church. He obviously wanted God to bless him and help him win his battles and build his capitol; and obviously believed the Christian God was powerful and feared him, but it is unclear that he ever truly gave his life to Christ.

Constantine ordered a huge cathedral built, unfinished in his day, but which was finally dedicated on Christmas day in 360 and remained the seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church until 1453 when the Seljuk Turks took the city and changed it into a Mosque. The picture of the Cathedral of Hagia Sofia you see was built: between 532 and 537 as the first two churches, including the one built by Constantine were destroyed. Hagia Sofia is now a museum. Much of the plaster which was used by Muslims to plaster over Christian works of art is now visible again.

QUESTION: So what do you think? Would having state recognition of Christianity be a good thing or not so good? How might it be good? How might it be harmful? What might be the effects upon the Church?

Change in the Church:

What he did, however was to make the state a principle player in the Church's internal affairs, and though Christianity would not be adopted as the official or sole religion of the Empire for some time after Constantine's death, it cannot be disputed that the church with Constantine entered an era of unprecedented change with enormous consequences for its life and piety. Masses of people began to flock into the church; bishops began to don more elaborate vestments and ministers began to take on a more sacerdotal role; worship migrated to larger and more elaborate structures called basilicas; incense, which was used as a sign of respect for the emperor, began appearing in Christian churches; gestures of respect usually made before the emperor, began to be a part of worship; whereas churches would on special occasions hold worship services in cemeteries where martyrs were buried, churches began to be built on these sites, or bones or objects of martyrs brought into churches and housed in special boxes. Constantine's mother made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and found "the true cross" which was said to have miraculous powers. She had a church built there. And despite pastors

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preaching that doing a pilgrimage to the Holy Land was not necessary to being a good Christian, people began to make the trip out of religious zeal...perhaps hoping to find some relic of an apostle, etc.

In this way, Constantine's favor began to change the church. Perhaps most importantly, he issued in a period of Ecclesiastical history, sometimes referred to as the **Constantinian Era**, which saw a rise in the prestige and **implication of the Church in State affairs**. Thus began something like 1600 years of collaboration between the Church and State in the West, and in the East wherever Byzantium held sway.

Was this good? A very difficult question. Some feel the Church's freedom and integrity was compromised: that corruption and prestige slowly sucked strength from the Church; that masses of people converting without fear of persecution and without proper instruction made the Church into something different than the Apostles had ever envisaged; that the temptations of power and wealth eroded the very virtue and service which were such flaming lights during the previous three centuries. As we have seen, the massive monastic reaction of retreat into the desert, poverty, service, and prayer seemed to reflect this judgment by many against the Church already in the time of Constantine.

In Sassanid Persia, during the 40 years from the time of the death of Constantine in 339 until 379, **Shapur II**, king of Persia, had some **190,000 Christians put to death**, partially, at least, because he believed they were a fifth column in his own land: Christians who, if given the chance, would be loyal to Rome (page Moffatt,145).

But it is **sobering nonetheless to consider this fact**: that wherever nations did not officially adopt the faith, the Church, sometimes quickly, sometimes over hundreds, even thousands of years was slowly crushed by persecution until it finally all but disappeared in Asia, North Africa, Nubia, and the Middle East. For whatever else we can say about this event and its consequences for the Church, one thing shines above all the rest: as a consequence of Constantine's Conversion, the Edict of Milan, and the later adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rome, the **Church survived and prospered**. And she brought along with her the Scriptures as her most precious possession. The missionary efforts and the growth of the Church in the developing world today, are a direct result of that survival of the Church and the Word. And for that we can bless God and thank him for his Sovereign Love.

And it must be added that in this early period—the 4th Century, the beginning of the Constantinian Era—the Church was also blessed with some of her greatest theologians and her greatest theological debates. The answers that evolved during this time of peace and blessing, answers that came from Church councils and from the pens of theologians have been a foundation upon which the Church has stood for centuries, and still stands today. It was a necessary theological shield protecting her and enabling her to withstand wave upon wave of destruction thrown against her by Barbarians to the North and Saracens to the South and East. The Church in the centuries to come was to survive onslaughts we can only imagine. And if she did, one of the reasons is that she had settled theological questions in Church Councils which provided her with an **internal vitality** and strength that stood its ground and prospered against the worst the enemy could throw at her. A life that flows from a proper understanding of the Gospel itself anointed by the Holy Spirit is strong indeed. It is to those Councils and

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Debates which we'll now turn.