



## CHRISTIANITY AND EMPIRE

October 8 / 9, 2025

I Peter 2:13-17; Romans 13:1-7

Gonzalez, Chapters 12-14, 22

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, <sup>4</sup> for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*

(Romans 13: 1-7)

### I. Introduction: Christianity in the Shadow of Empire

- a. **Luke 2:1-5** — The birth of Christ under Caesar's decree. Christianity emerges *within* the Roman imperial system.
- b. The tension of dual loyalty:
  - i. "Be subject to governing authorities" (Romans 13:1-7).
  - ii. "Honor the emperor" but "Fear God" (1 Peter 2:13-17).
- c. The first confession of the church: **"Jesus is Lord"** — a direct challenge to **"Caesar is Lord."**

### II. Early Roman Perceptions of Christianity (1st Century)

- a. **Christianity as a Jewish sect**
  - i. Initially tolerated as part of Judaism.
  - ii. Roman officials (Acts 18) sometimes *protected* Christians.
- b. **Nero's Persecution (64 AD)**
  - i. The Great Fire of Rome and the scapegoating of Christians.
  - ii. *Tacitus' account* — "Hatred against mankind."
  - iii. Execution of **Peter and Paul**.
  - iv. Persecution rooted in political convenience, not theology.

- III. **Sporadic Persecution and Growing Suspicion (2nd Century)**
  - a. **Pliny and Trajan (c. 112)**
    - i. Pliny's letter: Christians "sing a hymn to Christ as to a god."
    - ii. Trajan's policy: not hunted, but punished if accused and unrepentant.
    - iii. Persecution becomes *localized but constant*.
  - b. **The Christian Response**
    - i. Obedience to civil authority, but refusal to worship the emperor.
    - ii. Worship vs. loyalty — the crucial distinction.
- IV. **Systematic Persecution and the Age of the Martyrs (3rd Century)**
  - a. **Context: Empire in Crisis**
    - i. Plagues, invasions, and economic instability.
    - ii. Christians blamed for angering the gods.
  - b. **Decius' Persecution (249–251)**
    - i. Empire-wide demand to offer sacrifices to Roman gods.
    - ii. Certificates (*libelli*) as proof of compliance.
    - iii. The dilemma of the *lapsi* (those who renounced faith under duress).
    - iv. Martyrs like **Cyprian of Carthage** stand firm.
  - c. **Diocletian's "Great Persecution" (303–311)**
    - i. Churches destroyed, Scriptures burned, bishops imprisoned.
    - ii. The last and fiercest persecution before Christianity's triumph.
  - d. **The Church's Resilience**
    - i. Faith refined through suffering.
    - ii. Tertullian: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."
    - iii. González: persecution built spiritual resilience; Durant: it forged moral seriousness.
- V. **The Turning Point: Diocletian's Tetrarchy and the Rise of Constantine**
  - a. **The Tetrarchy (293)**
    - i. Diocletian divides empire into East and West under four rulers.
    - ii. Designed to bring stability after the chaos of the 3rd century.
    - iii. Key figures: Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, Constantius Chlorus.
  - b. **Religious Motives and the Great Persecution**
    - i. Diocletian's desire to restore Roman piety.
    - ii. The persecution of Christians as a test of loyalty to the gods.
    - iii. Galerius' Edict of Toleration (311): acknowledgment of failure.
- VI. **Constantine the Great and the Christian Empire**
  - a. **Background and Early Life**
    - i. Son of Constantius Chlorus and Helena (a Christian).
    - ii. Educated in both pagan and philosophical traditions.
  - b. **The Battle of the Milvian Bridge (312)**
    - i. Vision of the cross: *In hoc signo vinces* ("In this sign, conquer").
    - ii. Adoption of the Chi-Rho symbol.
    - iii. Victory over Maxentius—interpreted as divine vindication.

**c. Interpretations of Constantine's Conversion**

- i. **Durant:** pragmatic statesman using religion for unity.
- ii. **González:** providential instrument, ending persecution and ushering in Christendom.

**VII. The Edict of Milan (313)**

- a. Full religious toleration across the empire.
- b. Restoration of confiscated property to the church.
- c. Christianity gains legal and social legitimacy.
- d. Durant: political genius—using the church as a moral glue for a fragmented empire.

**VIII. Constantine's Support for the Church**

**a. Patronage and Privilege**

- i. Construction of churches (e.g., *Holy Sepulchre*).
- ii. Tax exemptions and judicial privileges for clergy.
- iii. Sunday established as a public day of rest.

**b. Theological Mediation and Imperial Oversight**

- i. Constantine as “bishop of those outside the church.”
- ii. Sought unity more than doctrinal precision.

**IX. The Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea (325)**

**a. The Crisis**

- i. Arius of Alexandria: the Son is a created being, not co-eternal with the Father.
- ii. Threatened unity and orthodoxy.

**b. The Council of Nicaea**

- i. 300+ bishops convened; Constantine presided.
- ii. Affirmed Christ as *homoousios* (“of one substance”) with the Father.
- iii. Produced the **Nicene Creed**.

- c. González: theology wedded to empire—birth of “imperial Christianity.”
- d. Durant: Constantine as political genius transforming theology into policy.

**X. Constantine's Conversion and Baptism**

- a. A gradual, pragmatic, and partially syncretic process.
- b. Retained some pagan symbols (e.g., Sol Invictus).
- c. Baptized shortly before death (337) by semi-Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia.
- d. Symbolic of the paradox of faith and empire.

**XI. The Transformation of Christian Identity**

**a. From Margins to Center**

- i. From persecuted minority to imperial faith.
- ii. Freedom for mission and art, but risk of corruption.

**b. Blessings and Dangers**

- i. Growth of Christian institutions and theology.
- ii. Loss of prophetic distinctiveness; rise of nominal Christianity.

- iii. “The church conquered the empire, but the empire captured the church.”  
— *Durant*.

## **XII. The Legacy of Constantine and the Christian Empire**

### **a. After Constantine**

- i. Constantius II and Arianism; Julian the Apostate’s pagan revival.
- ii. Theodosius I (380): Christianity declared official religion.

### **b. The Byzantine Continuation**

- i. Councils like Chalcedon (451).
- ii. Justinian’s codification of Christian law and construction of Hagia Sophia.

### **c. Augustine’s Response**

- i. After Rome’s sack (410), *The City of God* redefines the relationship between church and empire.
- ii. “Two cities... the earthly and the heavenly.”

## **XIII. Conclusion: The Paradox of Power and Faith**

- a. By 600, Christianity had become the empire’s spiritual foundation.
- b. The first confession — “Jesus is Lord” — remained a challenge to every earthly power.
- c. Constantine’s legacy:
  - i. Ended persecution and advanced Christian culture.
  - ii. Introduced the enduring tension between **faith and empire, cross and crown**.
  - iii. The question for every generation: Can the church wield power without losing the humility of the cross?