

THE EMPERORS: CONSTANTINE AND CHARLEMAGNE

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Constantine and Charlemagne are arguably two of the greatest Christian emperors to ever rule the Roman Empire. While these men reigned almost five centuries apart, they shared certain ambitions and personality traits that simultaneously made them effective leaders and caused them crucial problems. Neither Constantine nor Charlemagne was born “destined” to be an emperor. Although Constantine’s father rose to the rank of Augustus, Diocletian’s tetrarchy was not set up to facilitate dynastic rule. Charlemagne, on the other hand, was born into a royal family—but one whose members had begun ruling as mere “mayors of the palace,” evolved into kings, and would never have imagined themselves becoming “emperors” prior to the days of Charlemagne himself. While Constantine moved the capital away from the West and Charlemagne, in effect, restored the West to its grandeur, both men saw themselves as important protectors of the Christian Church. They both fought to uphold the Church against heresy, but at times overstepped their proper roles and either fell into error or attempted to assert inappropriate authority over the pope.

In analyzing the lives of these two men and the relationship of their respective empires with the Church, there cannot be a definitive conclusion as to who was the better man. Ultimately, neither Constantine nor Charlemagne fulfilled the duty of Christian emperor adequately. This study will show how they both fell short doctrinally, morally, and—most importantly—due to their desire for power over and beyond the supremacy due to the successors of St. Peter.

Chapter 1

Constantine

There are vastly differing views about the legacy of Constantine among various historians and scholars. In a well-known lecture in 1930, Norman Baynes called Constantine the “*religiosissimus Augustus*,”—the most pious of emperors— who “has his place amongst the seers and prophets,” and declared that it was “not altogether unfitting that he should be laid to rest in the Church of the Twelve Apostles, himself the thirteenth Apostle.”¹ He is venerated as a saint in the Orthodox Church, and is often referred to as “Constantine *the Great*” in common parlance. And yet, conversely, some scholars like Jacob Burckhardt have considered Constantine to be primarily politically-driven, a man who systematically used the Christian Church for his own purposes and had no real religious feeling at all.² Today, most historians consider Burckhardt’s analysis to be anachronistic, since he viewed Constantine largely through a post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation lens and failed to account both for the long-standing pagan influence on Constantine’s life and his “inexperience” in being a Christian.³

Still, Constantine continues to pose a dilemma for those who study his life and his influence. It appears that he had a relatively poor grasp of Christian doctrinal issues, but it is unclear whether this necessarily lessens the authenticity of his conversion. Even more importantly, his intentions towards the Church remain ambiguous. If he was in fact motivated by primarily political purposes, then his decision to use the Christian Church as a vehicle for his ambition was a fascinating choice, since most of his predecessors had attempted to destroy that

¹ Norman H. Baynes, *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1975), 28.

² H. A. Drake, “Constantine and Consensus,” *Church History* 64, no. 1 (March 1995): 2.

³ *Ibid.*

same Church. Regardless of Constantine's intentions, his actions marked a significant turning point in the history of the Church. Baynes says that Constantine is ultimately unable to be explained as a mere product of his times:

...all attempts to explain away Constantine as the natural outcome of the previous history of Rome have failed completely...It may be true that by A.D. 311 the imperial policy of persecution of the Christians had been proved a failure—Galerius, the instigator of that policy, had publicly confessed its futility—but this failure could not carry with it the implication that it was the duty of a Roman Emperor so far as to disavow Rome's past as himself to adopt the faith professed by perhaps one-tenth of his subjects. Constantine presents to the student of history so interesting a problem precisely because he is an intractable individual, because he was not merely the creation of the past, but marked in himself a new beginning which was in such large measure to determine the future of the Roman world.⁴

Constantine's date of birth is debated among scholars, but it is clear that he was born sometime in the A.D. 270-280s in Serbia. His parents were Flavius Constantius, a Roman officer, and Helena, who apparently came from relatively common origins.⁵ It is impossible to account for Constantine's rise to power without looking at its roots during the reign of Diocletian. Known for his division of the empire into Eastern and Western halves, as well as his establishment of a tetrarchy, Diocletian did not accomplish these things all at once. His "true greatness lay in his willingness to delegate authority, and in the absolute loyalty which he won from the colleagues whom he selected."⁶ After becoming emperor in 285, Diocletian decided that he needed an assistant, and so in 286, he appointed Maximian to be his Caesar (or secondary emperor). He also adopted Maximian as his son, since he had no sons of his own. Soon after, Diocletian decided to promote Maximian to the rank of Augustus, legally making him the co-emperor of the Western part of the empire. However, Diocletian maintained his superiority by

⁴ Baynes, 1-2.

⁵ A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*, rev. ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1967), 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

giving himself the surname “Jovius” and giving Maximian the surname “Herculius,” thereby showing that their relationship was equivalent to the father-son relationship of Jupiter and Hercules—not really a relationship of equals.⁷ It wasn’t until seven years later that Diocletian changed this state of affairs and decided that more help was needed to control the empire. In 293, he appointed two Caesars to serve under himself and Maximian respectively. For himself, Diocletian chose Galerius Maximianus (who would eventually convince him to institute large-scale Christian persecutions), and for Maximian, Flavius Constantius (Constantine’s father) was chosen.⁸

Upon this appointment, Flavius Constantius was married off to Maximian’s stepdaughter, Theodora, and was divorced from Constantine’s mother, Helena. Constantine, apparently still young (one of the reasons why his birthdate is called into question), was sent to live in the court of Diocletian.⁹ Then, in A.D. 305, Diocletian, in a surprising move, abdicated his throne, and evidently coerced his counterpart, Maximian, to resign in the West as well. With both Augusti gone, the Caesars were both promoted to the role of Augustus, and two new Caesars were chosen.¹⁰ Galerius’ new Caesar was called Maximin, and Constantius’ Caesar was called Severus.¹¹ It appears very likely that there was contention regarding these shifts in power. Evidently, Maximian was not eager to resign when Diocletian abdicated, and also he seems to have advocated for the appointment of his own son, Maxentius, as one of the new Caesars. For

⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

their own part, it seemed that Galerius and Constantius did not trust each other either or get along particularly well.

In 306, Constantius had fallen ill and asked that his son Constantine be sent to him. It is reasonable to presume that he had not seen the boy since his departure for Diocletian's court in 293, thirteen years before. According to the chronicler Lactantius, Galerius did not want to send Constantine to his father, fearing that the young man would cause problems if Constantius passed away.¹² Reportedly, after finally deciding to let Constantine go, Galerius actually changed his mind and had him chased after by a party of horsemen.¹³ Ultimately, Constantine met up with his father in Britain and was there to see him die. Despite his youth and lack of experience—and despite the rules upon which Diocletian's tetrarchy were based—the army proclaimed Constantine the emperor (Augustus) on the same day as his father's death.¹⁴

Shortly thereafter, Maximian's son Maxentius was declared Augustus in Italy after a mob uprising. Galerius ordered his Caesar, Severus, to destroy Maxentius' troops. But Maxentius had popular support in his favor because of his father's name, and Severus was forced to flee.¹⁵ As Galerius prepared to take on Maxentius himself, Maximian went to Constantine in hopes of an alliance, offering him the hand of his daughter, Fausta. Constantine divorced his first wife (by whom he already had one son, Crispus) and accepted Maximian's offer.¹⁶ During the next few years, there would be six different men claiming the title of Augustus: Constantine, Galerius,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., 60.

Maximin, Licinius, Maxentius,¹⁷ and Maximian (the latter at one time attempted to assassinate Constantine in his bed-chambers and was thwarted from doing so by his own daughter Fausta, Constantine's wife).¹⁸ After the death of Maximian and Galerius, Constantine sought to align himself with Licinius by giving him his half-sister, Constantia, in marriage. Meanwhile, Maximin and Maxentius formed an alliance.¹⁹ These events ultimately led to the Battle of Milvian Bridge in October 312, where Constantine's troops definitively destroyed Maxentius' troops, and Constantine became the senior Augustus.²⁰

Even though Constantine had always pursued a policy of toleration towards the Christians (even during the persecutions in the East under Galerius),²¹ the rapidity with which he embraced the Christian faith seemed to surprise everyone.²² The story, of course, is well known. Before the crucial battle, Constantine and his men saw an image of the Chi-Ro, and the words, *in hoc signo vinces* in the sky. Constantine had his men paint the Christian symbol on their shields, and their victory was massive. What followed was the Edict of Milan in 313, calling for the toleration and legalization of the Christian faith—not the establishment of it as the official state religion. With Diocletian's Great Persecution a not-too-distant memory in the public mind, it was a positive political move to allow both Christians and pagans to worship freely.²³ But nevertheless, Constantine immediately began taking moves that essentially aligned him with the

¹⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹⁸ Ibid., 62.

¹⁹ Ibid., 70.

²⁰ Ibid., 72.

²¹ Ibid., 64.

²² Andrew Alfoldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, trans. Harold Mattingly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 2.

²³ Drake, 11.

Church. By returning property that had been confiscated during persecutions, enforcing restitutions, funding construction of new church buildings, and instating legal privileges for the clergy,²⁴ Constantine simultaneously gave credibility to the Church and stripped the state's endorsement from pagan religions.

Almost 10 years after their joint issuing of the Edict of Milan, Licinius and Constantine began to have conflict with each other. While Constantine certainly had other motivations for wanting to take over the Eastern part of the empire, it would not be unreasonable to call this civil war a religious war.²⁵ Licinius had begun minor Christian persecutions and Constantine deemed it his duty to rescue the Christians in the other half of the empire.²⁶ Constantine defeated Licinius and became sole emperor in A.D. 324.²⁷

It is worth noting that Constantine did not immediately convert to Christianity after his mystical experience on the battlefield. Instead, he became a Christian “hearer”—the lowest rank among the catechumens, and waited many years to be baptized until he was eventually on his death bed. This was not an entirely uncommon practice at the time, since the sacrament of penance was not as widely used as it is today. There was considerable disagreement about whether or not one could be forgiven of mortal sin after baptism, and not only were penances public, but they were extremely harsh. However, it is unclear if Constantine held off his baptism because of these trepidations or if he had other reasons. For one thing, Constantine was not what one would call a humble man. He continued to allow the—albeit limited—pagan cult

²⁴ Hugo Rahner, *Church and State in Early Christianity*, trans. Leo Donald Davis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 44.

²⁵ Baynes, 14.

²⁶ Jones, 112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

surrounding worship of himself and his imperial family.²⁸ He was oddly superstitious and had a propensity towards Stoicism, Platonism, and, at various times, the cult of the “invincible sun.”²⁹ It was not until 320 that he removed the “Unconquered Sun” from his coins.³⁰ He seemed to believe his role as emperor included an element of divinity, and to think that he himself was a mystical embodiment of Providence. Somewhat pompously, Constantine saw himself as God’s chosen instrument to fix all the ills of the empire, saying, “What remedy did the Divinity think of [for Christian persecution]? God willed my services and judged them fit means to accomplish his own purposes.”³¹ Constantine knew that he needed the popular support of the people, and thus, unlike previous emperors, he focused heavily on speech-making and rhetoric geared toward the masses.³² Living in the aftermath of Diocletian’s Great Persecution seems to have made him aware that public opinion was extremely important, as is shown by “the unprecedented variety of his coin images and slogans.”³³

²⁸ Rahner, 41.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jones, 112.

³¹ Rahner, 43.

³² H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 282.

³³ Ibid.

Chapter 2

Charlemagne

Charlemagne was the elder son of King Pepin of the Franks. In 754, Pope Stephen II had given Pepin, Charlemagne, and his brother Carloman, the title *patricius Romanorum*.³⁴ Pepin never had much use for titles, but for Charlemagne, this label would later come to be very meaningful. When Pepin died in 768, he divided his kingdom between his two sons, as was the Frankish custom. It may seem odd that the younger son, Carloman, was given the larger piece of territory,³⁵ but Charlemagne (named for his grandfather Charles Martel) had been born illegitimately.³⁶ Although the Franks commonly “married” outside of the Church according to their ancient customs, and illegitimacy was not typically seen as an obstacle to inheritance, there was rancor between the two brothers and it seemed that war was imminent. However, Carloman died before this could occur. Thus, Charlemagne soon became the sole ruler of the Frankish kingdom.³⁷ King Pepin had been an honorable and just ruler, and many would maintain that “Charlemagne’s reign was in all respects the completion of that of [his father’s].”³⁸

Some have argued that Charlemagne’s forced conversion of the Saxons was “the central preoccupation” of his reign, even calling his endeavor the first of the Crusades.³⁹ This is a naïve view. The truth is that just as Constantine had perceived the Donatists to be a threat to unity five

³⁴ Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1939), 225.

³⁵ Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Peter Munz, vol. 9 of *Studies in Mediaeval History*, ed. Geoffrey Barraclough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 20.

³⁶ Richard Winston, *Charlemagne: From the Hammer to the Cross* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 4.

³⁷ Fichtenau, 20.

³⁸ Pirenne, 227-8.

³⁹ Hywell Williams, “Charlemagne the Pragmatist,” *History Today* 60, no. 9 (September 2010):72. This claim shows a poor understanding of what the purpose of the Crusades actually was, since they were not meant to be attempts at conversion—forced or otherwise.

hundred years before, Charlemagne perceived the Saxons in the same manner. He feared that they might one day cause division in his kingdom, or even overrun his land. The fact that “they were Germans like himself and his Franks,” and that “their language was very similar to his,” only made them “all the more menacing,”⁴⁰ in the same way that a heresy might be perceived as more of a threat than a foreign religion. And so, Charlemagne (largely out of fear) gave the Saxons an ultimatum: convert and become Christian, or be killed. This was partially due to his belief that all men should be Christian, but more than that,

It was also a shrewd political measure, the simplest and most effective way Charles knew to consolidate conquered territory. Those Saxons who became Christians were cut off from the community of their fellow pagans and thrown into a natural alliance with the Christian Franks... If Charles could provide these converted Saxons with military protection until they were numerous enough to defend themselves, he would be able to hold Saxony with the assistance of Saxons. In the long run, he knew, conquest rested on the consent of the conquered.⁴¹

Charlemagne’s venture into Spain was based on the same concept. He believed that he could conquer Spain by the consent of the Christian population, and was even surprised when the city of Saragossa was not pleased to welcome his army.⁴²

Charlemagne had a complicated relationship with the pope. In 774, Charlemagne visited Rome for Easter, apparently surprising Pope Hadrian I by showing up unannounced.⁴³ Not bothering to inform Hadrian that he was coming was perhaps “a subtle hint that he was not accountable to the pope for his actions.”⁴⁴ His behavior was that of “a ruler come to inspect one

⁴⁰ Winston, 123.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Harold Lamb, *Charlemagne: The Legend and the Man* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1954), 90.

⁴³ Winston., 93.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

of his cities, not like one head of state paying a formal visit to another.”⁴⁵ Charlemagne had just conquered the Lombards, and he now began to make official use of his title of *patricius Romanorum*.⁴⁶ During this visit, he both renewed his father’s commitment to serve as the pope’s protector and also promised to increase his father’s land donations to the papacy—although these territories were only unimportant ones.⁴⁷ He had no intention of giving Italy to the pope, despite the pope’s avid desire to obtain it. And,

As for the Pope, he naturally tried to regard this patrician, who after all had received his power from [Pope] Stephen II...as merely the protector of the Papacy. But here there was a fatal contradiction. To begin with, a protector readily becomes a master. Pippin [sic] was never that, for he had loyally modelled his Italian policy on that of the Pope; but Charles was to become the master. The fact that he assumed the title of patrician only when he had conquered the Lombard kingdom shows plainly that he regarded this title also as a conquest; as one that he held in his own right.⁴⁸

Charlemagne would sometimes avoid the pope because he did not want to listen to the requests that he would invariably make.⁴⁹ Charlemagne believed that there was a spiritual sphere in which the pope had supremacy, and that he, the political leader, could not usurp this role. But it was clear that, for Charlemagne, this influence in the world of prayer was an *internal* sphere that did not extend into the temporal world at all.⁵⁰ For this reason—while Charlemagne never actively took up an offensive against the pope, he made sure he knew his place by not acquiescing to his every demand. “In effect he was making it clear to Hadrian that he was the true ruler of Rome and the arbiter of Italy...Hadrian resented Charles’s betrayal of his proffered

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. David. S. Bachrach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 84-5.

⁴⁷ Pirenne, 228; Becher, 85.

⁴⁸ Pirenne, 228-9.

⁴⁹ Winston, 128.

⁵⁰ Fichtenau, 61.

friendship. In his letters to Charles he was alternately bewildered, hurt, nagging, and even mildly threatening.”⁵¹

Thus, Charlemagne protected the pope because of his devotion to the Church, but he did not always assume—as his father had done—that the pope outranked him, or should be submitted to (*even in matters of doctrine*).⁵² Just as Constantine had done, Charlemagne considered himself a theologian in his own right, and felt that his concerns and recommendations ought to be taken seriously. For example, after the Second Council of Nicaea, in 787, Charlemagne received the decisions of the Council and found them to be unsatisfactory. What he did not know was that there had been a mistranslation from the original text; thus, the statements of the Council appeared to say that images were to be worshipped rather than revered, which was not the intended meaning.⁵³ Charlemagne was infuriated and refused to accept the decisions of the Council—not realizing that his only real matter of divergence was a mistranslation. Nevertheless, the stand he took against Rome and Constantinople showed clearly enough that “Charlemagne felt himself to be the chief defender of the Church ‘internally.’”⁵⁴

And yet, Charlemagne’s embrace of Christian principles did not extend into his moral life. In keeping with Frankish customs, he married and divorced several times—primarily for political motives—and kept numerous concubines.⁵⁵ He fathered at least five daughters and four sons, many illegitimately. The daughters he doted on and would not allow to marry or leave the imperial palace (instead allowing them to keep lovers and even bear illegitimate children in his

⁵¹ Winston, 128.

⁵² Pirenne, 230.

⁵³ Lamb, 222.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁵ Fichtenau, 40.

home), but the sons he was never affectionate with, and he sent them away from the palace at a young age.⁵⁶ His eldest son, Pepin, was a hunchback and the heir-apparent to the throne. But due to the jealousy of one of his later wives, Charlemagne sent Pepin away to live in a monastery and re-christened one of his younger sons with the name Pepin—the titular name of inheritance.⁵⁷ At his death, Charlemagne’s will left only one-twelfth of his treasure to his legitimate heirs, and nothing at all to his daughters and illegitimate progeny (despite the fact that he had housed them and cared for them while he was living). The rest of his estate was consigned to “be spent for the benefit of his own soul.”⁵⁸ This incongruity between his moral life and his dedication to the Christian faith presents a striking paradox:

A half-taught brute, taking strange women as he lusted for them, gorging meat after sunset on fast days, tricking his friends, he contrived to master all who opposed him... Yet that same man honored his father and mother, never blasphemed, gave away his possessions, championed ‘the Lord’s poor’—and felt personal responsibility for all human beings under his rule. That was the *Charlemagne* who grew into a legend.⁵⁹

In 781 an emissary from Constantinople came to ask Charlemagne for the hand of his daughter Rotrud. Irene, the widow of emperor Leo IV, wanted to form a political marriage between Charlemagne’s daughter and her son, the young emperor Constantine VI. Charlemagne agreed, and the young boy and girl were betrothed.⁶⁰ This alliance would have been beneficial both for Charlemagne and the Byzantines and would have ensured that war would not come about between them. People spoke of “a new Constantine and a new Helena,”⁶¹ who would

⁵⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁷ Winston, 155-6.

⁵⁸ Fichtenau, 43.

⁵⁹ Lamb, 205-6.

⁶⁰ Pirenne, 229.

⁶¹ Fichtenau, 67.

reunite the East and West, and Pope Hadrian himself was hopeful about this prospect.⁶² However, when Irene called an ecumenical council to examine the Iconoclast issue, Charlemagne felt that she was overstepping her bounds, and he broke off the engagement.⁶³ Had he ever intended for this engagement to proceed further? It is unclear. But it does seem evident that he wanted to obtain supremacy over Byzantium more than he wished to garner a political friendship.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Church and State

One of the most famous analyses of Constantine portrays his relationship with the Church as being completely one-dimensional:

exclusively... a power struggle between Constantine and the bishops, based on [the] assumption that Constantine grasped the potential of the Christian movement as a means to strengthen his political power. This view... was based on an even older premise that the church became 'worldly' as a result of Constantine's conversion and lost its spiritual purity... not only worldly but also subservient, a tool of the secular power, an 'imperial Church.' The unspoken premise of such reasoning is that nonintervention was an option. Conceivably, Constantine could have adopted a hands-off approach, but to do so not only would he have had to deny three centuries of imperial tradition concerning the religious role of the emperor, but he also—given the common belief of his age in the direct role played by deity in the success or failure of imperial plans and the need to consult deity before the simplest duties could be discharged—would have had to surrender his control over important sectors of government policy... It is anachronistic to see the authority Constantine asserted either as a power grab on his part or as spiritual capitulation by the bishops on theirs.⁶⁴

Indeed, as an emperor in the early fourth century, it would have been an almost unthinkable notion for Constantine to adopt a completely non-interventionist attitude towards religion. It had, up to that point in Roman society, been the role of the emperor to be the leader of the empire's religion, and it was a foreign concept to have a separate spiritual leader such as the pope. While Constantine never rejected the pope's authority, he quickly became more and more involved in the Church, and he often overstepped his bounds and attempted to control Church affairs.

One can assume that many of his contemporaries would have actually expected this active participation in Church affairs from him as being part of his rightful role. Indeed, Constantine considered himself a "bishop for external affairs," in the sense that the Church's

⁶⁴ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 283.

bishops were “internal bishops” and he was the Church’s outside protector.⁶⁵ One key example of Constantine exerting his authority in Church matters occurred in his attempts to wipe out the Donatist heresy in North Africa. It disturbed him, and seemed “very grievous to him that a large number of his subjects in lands which the divine providence [had] entrusted to him should be found persistently turning to vanity and that bishops should be at variance with one another.”⁶⁶ It is in keeping with Constantine’s overall values that he would dislike the Donatists, rigorists who believed that those who had lapsed during the Great Persecution should not be allowed back into the Church, and that sacraments performed by lapsed clergy were not valid. Constantine did not like disunity, and the idea of not readmitting someone to the Church would have been reprehensible to him. “The emperor’s peace-loving nature, transposed in terms of political realism, fueled the man’s great passion—to conquer, unify, and preserve the vast Roman Empire. All else was only a means to this end and was calculated only in relation to it.”⁶⁷ So, while he generally pursued a policy of non-coercion—even towards pagans—the Donatist heresy was the one major exception.⁶⁸

While “the ambiguity of Constantine’s Christianity designed to appeal to the largest number may have played well in many venues...North Africa was not one of them.”⁶⁹ Before his active course against the Donatists began, Constantine heard an appeal in his court from the heretical bishops of North Africa, and he even called a synod in 313 to meet in Rome and

⁶⁵ Rahner, 45.

⁶⁶ Baynes, 10.

⁶⁷ Rahner, 46.

⁶⁸ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 347.

⁶⁹ David Alexander, “Rethinking Constantine’s Interaction with the North African ‘Donatist’ Schism,” in *Rethinking Constantine: History, Theology, and Legacy*, ed. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 53.

address their grievances against the orthodox bishop Caecilian.⁷⁰ However, this synod did not go at all the way that Constantine had intended, and the two parties ended up more at odds with each other than before.⁷¹ In 314, Constantine attempted again to amend the situation by calling a much larger gathering of bishops—a council at Arles. Ultimately, Constantine enforced an armed repression of Donatism in Africa that lasted four years, but was finally forced to give up the task, much to his humiliation.⁷²

After defeating Licinius, Constantine soon discovered that the Eastern Church was heavily divided over the Arian controversy. After his failed experience with the Donatist schism, he feared another irreparable division.⁷³ His attempts to bring peace between the Arian heretics and the orthodox “Nicene” party engendered another prime example of imperial authority being exerted in Church affairs. At his core, Constantine was bothered by the dissent and discord within his empire; he did not consider the theological issues brought to the table by Arius to be of any great importance. At the beginning of the Arian controversy, he famously wrote a letter to both Arius and his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, asking them to reconcile because he found their dispute—over whether or not Christ was *divine and coequal* with the Father—to be a matter that was “intrinsically trifling and of little moment.”⁷⁴ In order to be able to make such a statement, it is clear that Constantine had an inadequate understanding of this crucial theological issue and its enormous ramifications. Unsurprisingly, neither Arius nor Alexander, who were both seriously invested in this disagreement (which went to the very heart of the Christian faith),

⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁷¹ Ibid., 60.

⁷² Baynes, 14.

⁷³ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁴ Drake, “Constantine and Consensus,” 4.

was content to accept Constantine's ill-informed counsel. He went on to advise that, "we are not all of us like-minded on every subject," and thus, "as to your subtle disputations of questions of little or no significance, though you may be unable to harmonize in sentiment, such differences should be consigned to the secret custody of your own minds and thoughts."⁷⁵

This propensity for compromise and glossing over difficult issues is a complete misunderstanding of what it means to belong to a Church with guidelines for orthodoxy. Indeed, Constantine's later conflicts with Athanasius—the "defender of orthodoxy"—would be along these very lines. Constantine feared division and schism. Athanasius, appealing to Constantine, said, "The Lord will judge between me and you, since you yourself agree with those who calumniate your humble servant."⁷⁶ Athanasius was exiled. "It is hard now to capture the effrontery in those words, spoken to an emperor brought by tradition and his own convictions to believe that he was the conduit between divine and mortal, the living voice of God on this earth."⁷⁷ Constantine wanted to restore heretics to full communion at all costs, even if their repentance was dubious. For this, some have heralded him a champion of "inclusion," and conversely marked Athanasius as holding tenaciously to a "policy of exclusion."⁷⁸ In reality, Constantine's "emphasis on diversity and a broad, vaguely defined standard of orthodoxy indicates very clearly the type of organization [he] envisioned. He thought of Christianity as an 'umbrella' organization, able to hold a number of different wings or factions together under a 'big tent' of overarching mutual interest."⁷⁹ But this idea that Constantine had—his concept of

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 7.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 448.

⁷⁸ Baynes, 28.

⁷⁹ Drake, "Constantine and Consensus," 4.

what the Church was or of what it should be—was based on false premises. The Church is not (and can never be) a group of mutual factions coexisting with heterodox beliefs. The Church is based in the truth of the Gospel message; without a basic belief in the importance of truth, all else ceases to matter. Ultimately, it is evident that Constantine’s actions against the Donatists shaped his later policy in regards to the Arians.⁸⁰ During both the Donatist and Arian controversies, the “‘real issues’ were not immediately or intrinsically significant to Constantine.”⁸¹ Constantine exiled many bishops, like Athanasius, who wanted to stay faithful to the teachings of Nicaea. Aside from “political motives, Constantine’s change of mind was influenced by his sister Constantia, whose court was full of Arian priests.”⁸² Indeed, Constantine’s eventual toleration of Arianism was the ultimate logical conclusion of his belief that he was the supreme “external” bishop of the empire.

On the other hand, when looking at what the notion of “empire” meant for Charlemagne, it is not uncommon to consider the influence of St. Augustine’s concept of the “City of God.”⁸³ While Augustine certainly spoke of a kingdom outside of the temporal order, his ideas have often been applied to the political sphere. Indeed, “...it has become customary to describe the theocratic trend in medieval political thinking as *political Augustinianism*.”⁸⁴ Charlemagne’s advisor Alcuin had a conception of the “City of God” as a concrete area that was directly aligned with the physical boundaries of Christendom. Anything heathen, or outside of the empire, was

⁸⁰ Alexander, 89.

⁸¹ Ibid., 89.

⁸² Rahner, 47.

⁸³ Peter Munz, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Peter Munz, vol. 9 of *Studies in Mediaeval History*, ed. Geoffrey Barraclough (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), xx.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

part of the “City of the Devil.”⁸⁵ But despite the fact that Charlemagne may likely have been influenced by the works of Augustine (and by the ideology of Alcuin), it is also probable that his attempts to build an empire were more geared towards a replication of the model he saw in the Byzantine East than a bold strike to build a “City of God” on earth. The Byzantine model was appealing to Charlemagne because of the way in which it blurred the temporal and the sacred spheres, giving more power to the emperor in every realm of life.⁸⁶

But Charlemagne’s muddling of the sacred and the secular had major consequences for the West. His ideal of a “sacred empire” put religion at the service of the state, and created a caesaro-papism that the Church was ultimately not willing to tolerate. In fact, Charlemagne’s reign laid the foundations for conflicts like the Investiture Controversy (when strong reformer Pope Gregory VII challenged the very imperial bishoprics that had been founded under Charlemagne).⁸⁷ Ultimately, the spirit of having a “sacred empire” implied certain core beliefs that were not compatible with the Church’s autonomy or orthodoxy.

A unique element of the “sacred element” concerns Charlemagne’s coronation. The traditional story put forward by Charlemagne’s biographer, Einhard, tells of Charlemagne’s arrival in Rome on Christmas Day 800 and his surprise at Pope Leo III’s decision to crown him emperor. Charlemagne announced to Einhard, on his way out of the coronation, “If I had known what Leo meant to do I would never have set foot in this church, even on this holy day!”⁸⁸ This classic account gives us an image of Charlemagne as the humble and reluctant emperor.

However, there is assuredly room to challenge this interpretation. Not only did Charlemagne

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., xxi.

⁸⁷ Ibid., xxii.

⁸⁸ Lamb, 235.

come to the Mass already dressed in the traditional imperial garb, but he was already in the habit of carrying out most of the responsibilities of an emperor prior to being awarded the ceremonial title.⁸⁹ Indeed, “It is obvious that Charles no longer regarded himself as a *patricius Romanorum*. He was acting as the protector of Christianity... Apart from the petty princes of England and Spain he was the only sovereign in the West.”⁹⁰ It may well be that what was perceived as Charlemagne’s reluctance to become emperor was actually his resistance to receiving his authority from the hands of the pope—which meant being bound and beholden to him—rather than being able to claim his imperial dignity as coming directly from God.⁹¹ This viewpoint would be consistent with Charlemagne’s clear desire for ecclesiastical authority independent from the papacy.

Ultimately, it is clear that Charlemagne expected *something* when he went to the altar in December 800, or else he would not have gone. One possible explanation is that he expected to be proclaimed emperor of Christendom, or of the western Christian people, but not of *Rome*, like the emperors of old.⁹² It is entirely probable that Charlemagne felt tricked by Pope Leo. He had been proclaimed emperor “of a vanished world dominion that had included Britain and Constantinople, as well as the Holy Land, Spain, and Africa, now held by the kalifates [sic].”⁹³ Part of Charlemagne’s resistance to accepting the crown from Leo can be understood in terms of

⁸⁹ Williams, 72.

⁹⁰ Pirenne, 231.

⁹¹ Williams, 72.

⁹² Lamb, 236.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 236-7.

his trepidation about the reactions that might come from Byzantium.⁹⁴ The whole affair was a daring move on Leo's part. He had proclaimed that this coronation was the will of God and he had physically been the one to crown Charlemagne as the emperor. Doing so set a precedent for future popes to assert authority in a manner that might be called papo-caesarism.⁹⁵ And so out of Leo's single act "grew endless questioning—of the continuity of the Roman Empire, of the two swords of the world, of the powers of Popes and emperors, the Holy Roman Empire itself, of the nature of the medieval Christian dominion."⁹⁶

Thus, it is clear that Charlemagne's coronation was a turning point. But that is not to say that it was an intentionally contrived turning point by the pope:

After a period of complete anarchy in the West in both Church and state, when the papacy had been degraded by and become the plaything of the factions, and by the unworthy occupants these factions brought to the See of Peter, Charlemagne's intervention was decisive in helping the papacy reestablish itself. The pope probably had nothing else in view in placing the crown on Charles' head than to give him the recognition of the Church and to acknowledge the support Charles promised him in return.⁹⁷

Some would say that Leo had groveled to the secular king in exchange for protection. This could be evidenced by the new mosaic Leo had ordered before the coronation. It depicted a very large image of Saint Peter extending a pallium in his right hand to Leo, who was depicted much smaller and on his knees. And it also showed Peter's left hand bestowing the standard of the Church on Charlemagne—who was equal in size to Pope Leo. This mosaic implied that the pope

⁹⁴ Louis Bouyer, *Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit*, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 35.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

⁹⁶ Lamb, 236-7.

⁹⁷ Bouyer, 35-6.

and the emperor were indeed equals.⁹⁸ And unfortunately, by the very action of validating Charlemagne's protection, Leo may have ensured that his support would be only temporary.⁹⁹ In fact, the signs that Charlemagne wanted to detach from the papacy began immediately after the coronation. "When he reached his chambers in the bishop's house near St. Peter's he took off the Roman regalia and never put on the purple, embroidered garments again. When he left Rome after Easter that year, he did not return."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Lamb, 232.

⁹⁹ Bouyer, 36.

¹⁰⁰ Lamb, 236-7.

Conclusion

All things considered, Constantine and Charlemagne are difficult men to compare. They were both warriors and statesmen, both professed Christians, but politically ambitious. Yet, they lived centuries apart and the political climates they faced were vastly different. Charlemagne sought to imitate in the West a way of life that Constantine had christened in the East. But arguably, this was not a manner of ruling that should have been implemented in the first place.

Nor are their differences negligible. Constantine sought peace and unity over all else, and for this reason he would appease heretics in hopes of bringing them into (even partial) communion. This explains his infuriation with the Donatist rigorists who believed one could not be readmitted to the Church after committing apostasy during persecution. Rigorism had no place in Constantine's worldview because he wanted all people to coexist happily in his empire, whether or not they were orthodox. Conversely, Charlemagne was willing to resort even to violent coercion (in the case of the Saxons) to get people to convert to the faith. Arguably, he may be called a rigorist in his own right—but also ultimately for the sake of a Christian people living in harmony.

Constantine's vision of the Chi-Ro gave him a unique role in the minds of his subjects as someone who had been directly appointed by the divine will. It gave him the ability to claim a special status; men imagined that he understood the mind of God, and that his actions were God's will. But his position was *so* unique that it couldn't be passed on to his successors. Constantine's ability to be the "bishop of those outside" died with him.¹⁰¹ Charlemagne's empire largely died with him, as well. The world of the Carolingian Renaissance was short-lived and ultimately non-sustainable over a long period of time.

¹⁰¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops*, 466-7.

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