

Constantine the Great Blender of Christianity and Paganism

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When Constantine converted to Christianity upon seeing a vision in the sky, it was perhaps the greatest gift a fourth century Christian could ask for. It was not long before Christianity then became the Roman Empire's official, legal religion. Roman persecution finally ended for good, and Christianity flourished. Constantine, however, also brought to Christianity his personal pagan past that would be the subject of much controversy for those looking back on history. Was Constantine really a Christian? Or was he a pagan in Christian disguise with impure motives?

Constantine is such an important figure because his conversion in the fourth century is the watershed event that cemented Christianity as the world's official religion, even to the present day. It is thus very important to understand Constantine, especially his pre-conversion bent toward paganism, and what he may or may not have brought into Christianity. His convictions and beliefs would do much to shape the course of Christianity, and even today we still feel the effects in areas such as why Christians celebrate Christmas on December 25. In order to assess Constantine's paganism and Christianity, certain key points must be examined: his conversion; fruits of Christianity; and fruits of paganism. Examination of these will shed light on who and what he really was.

Constantine's Christianity is surrounded by controversy: was he really a Christian or not? Historians and scholars disagree. This paper is not written in order to come to judgment on whether Constantine was saved or not; the goal is to examine to what extent he held to or turned away from paganism after his conversion, and with that, we can gain an understanding of his Christianity and pagan influences on it. As far as Constantine *really* being a Christian or not, this label is not as black and white an issue as many would think it to be. The definition of Constantine's Christianity is often painted as an all or nothing thing: either he was a total pagan

in Christian disguise who could do nothing right, or he was a total Christian who could do nothing wrong. However, to paint him with an either-or brush creates a situation where he is seen as totally one or the other, and thus blocks the ability to understand and accept him as he truly may have been—did he struggle his whole Christian life to break free from a life steeped in paganism, in thought, word and deed, and thus show mixed fruits?

It cannot be understated that the definition of Christianity that is applied to Constantine must not be so black and white as an either-or with salvation hinging on such an either-or. The definition of Christianity that will be applied to Constantine herein is *the state of being a follower of Jesus Christ—a disciple whose purpose is to come after Jesus with the intent to believe and learn his teachings and live them as a lifestyle*. The concept of receiving salvation is a part of learning Jesus’ teachings and following them, as Jesus and Scripture have a specific teaching on receiving salvation. This, however, does not inherently mean that every person who tries to come after Jesus as his student in discipleship will understand what Jesus has taught on receiving salvation. It is theoretically possible to be a disciple of a great teacher and yet misunderstand some of his teachings—even Jesus and his seemingly most important teaching of all with personal implications—receiving salvation. Applying such a definition of Christianity will allow an understanding of Constantine to emerge that is free from the straightjacket of thinking he was either a saved Christian or a condemned pagan. Instead, a new way of understanding him may be opened.

#### *Conversion and Mixed Fruits of Christianity*

Constantine’s conversion gives insight into his Christian and pagan convictions. There is perhaps no more important time in a to-be Christian’s life than his conversion. In the course of how a biblical conversion functions in the life of a believer, it is the time when the foundation of

faith is laid for the rest of the believer's life. This foundation becomes the ground on which a new Christian stands and grows afterward. It is also the time when a person decides to shed his old sinful ways of living. In many cases the quality of the foundation either helps or hinders the new convert in living the Christian life he has just entered.

The event that led to Constantine's conversion was of all things war—he was trying to become the unopposed emperor of the West. Constantine was made emperor in the West by his father's troops when, in 306, his father died while at their head. Others, though, would also claim to be emperor over the next few years; subsequently, they would fight and try to kill one another to become the sole emperor. When only two claimants were left in the summer of 312, Constantine and Maxentius, Constantine invaded Italy, where Maxentius was. He fought and won battles over the next couple months and by fall had reached Rome.<sup>1</sup> Though still a pagan, Constantine was about to experience something that would forever change his life and the entire Roman Empire.

In the time before he reached Maxentius, Constantine had a vision: “About the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, ‘By this conquer.’”<sup>2</sup> That night Constantine also had a dream: “The Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy.”<sup>3</sup> From this account there are two important pieces to examine: the sun and the sign.

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<sup>1</sup> This summary of events is taken from James North, *A History of the Church: From Pentecost to Present* (Joplin: College Press, 1983), 76-78.

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Concerning Constantine's conversion, the imagery of the sun is of tremendous importance. It is no secret that Rome was pagan, and in the time up to Constantine's conversion the worship of the sun, Sol Invictus, was most popular.<sup>4</sup> Constantine himself was influenced by sun worship, and Sol Invictus was Constantine's patron god. He "had projected his devotion to the Sun god using the established language of late Roman imperial art."<sup>5</sup> In the years before he defeated Maxentius, he put the Sun-god on the front of his Gallic coinage, right next to Mars.<sup>6</sup> Also, in 310 he dedicated rich gifts in a shrine of Apollo in Gaul, most likely for the universal Sol-Apollo.<sup>7</sup> It does not appear to be a coincidence then that the account of his vision which led to his conversion involves the sun in such an intimate way—it was the time of the "midday sun," he saw the sign "resting over the sun," the cross "formed from light." That the sign was "over" the sun signifies superiority of the sign. This vision taking place with these circumstances reveals the way Constantine thought about religion, and perhaps what he expected from it. For even after his vision and victory over Maxentius, he "did not at once break the ties that bound him to the invincible Sun."<sup>8</sup>

Constantine was no stranger to visions from the gods. He had also in recent years claimed to have had a vision of Apollo proclaiming his fitness to rule:

According to a panegyric oration, a speech in praise of Constantine delivered in Gaul in 310, the emperor had recently experienced a vision of Apollo, who had appeared accompanied by the goddess of victory, Victoria, to offer Constantine laurel crowns. These were marked with the numerals XXX, which foretold he would rule for thirty years.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Alfoldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor* (New York: Overlook Press, 2009), 172.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Alfoldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor*, 129.

These types of visions, perhaps not surprisingly, at this time correspond to efforts to set the emperor apart from his imperial colleagues and rivals.<sup>10</sup> Propaganda is a useful tool for a ruler. Constantine rushed to Apollo's temple to give thanks for his victory over Maximian. Perhaps propaganda also played a role in Eusebius' account of Constantine's vision. Lactantius reports not a vision concerning the sun but a dream only where Constantine is told to use the sign.<sup>11</sup> Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* reads like a propaganda piece; perhaps it incorporates the sun motif to speak the language of the pagan climate of the time. It captured the attention of the pagan world.

Constantine was expecting "the prosperity of his Empire in peace and its victory in war" from a god.<sup>12</sup> Potential prosperity and victory attracted Constantine to the Christian God ("god" in his mind at least at first), and are what caused him to be open to Christianity in the first place. The basis of Constantine's religious convictions was success on earth. He did not attach himself to Christ until he believed Christ lent him his aid—this is a survival of the way of thinking that characterizes ancient paganism.<sup>13</sup> What actually spurred the vision and dream was that Constantine believed he needed to seek a "god to aid him" because "without the aid of a god [soldiers and military numbers] could achieve nothing."<sup>14</sup> It is upon this beseeching of a god before the battle with Maxentius that Constantine had his famous vision and dream. Eusebius reports that Constantine sought his father's God, Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, the paramount importance is that Constantine was not looking for the Jesus Christ who would save him from his sins, but a god who would bring him victory in battle.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Alfoldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

After his vision and dream, he summoned Christian leaders to inform him about the Christ and the sign from the vision. According to Eusebius, they taught him the basic gospel facts about Jesus concerning his divinity and work, and also said of the sign that it was “a token of immortality, and was an abiding trophy of the victory over death”<sup>16</sup> that Christ won on earth. Constantine was convinced. He decided “personally to apply himself to the divinely inspired writings.”<sup>17</sup> He also took the “priests of God as his advisors” and “deemed it right to honour the God who had appeared to him with all due rites.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, he attached himself to Christianity, or became a Christian, further convinced this new god was with him by his victory over Maxentius at Milvian Bridge.

Of further importance concerning Constantine’s conversion is the sign he saw and how he used it. Eusebius describes the sign:

A tall pole plated with gold had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross. Up at the extreme top a wreath woven of precious stones and gold had been fastened. On it two letters, intimating by its first characters the name ‘Christ’, formed the monogram of the Saviour’s title, *rho* being intersected in the middle by *chi*. ...From the transverse bar...hung suspended a cloth, an imperial tapestry covered with a pattern of precious stones fastened together....The upright pole...carried the golden head-and-shoulders portrait of [Constantine] and his sons.<sup>19</sup>

At this time in the pagan Roman Empire, “everyone was...convinced that you could bring the supernatural powers into your service by magic signs, formulas and rites.”<sup>20</sup> Constantine was no different. Still thinking like a true pagan even after discussing this newfound god Jesus Christ with Christian leaders before his battle, he marked the *chi-rho* sign on his soldiers’ shields for the ensuing fight against Maxentius. Constantine wanted the mystical power and protection that came with the use of this new magic sign. “Eusebius...regularly describes the divine sign...as a

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 81-82.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Alfoldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 22.

magic charm” that helped Constantine to victory.<sup>21</sup> Constantine himself “attributed [the victory] to his use of Christian symbols...as military standards.”<sup>22</sup> From this point on the sign was always used by Constantine for protection against every opposing and hostile force, and he commanded replicas of it to lead all his armies.<sup>23</sup> Constantine also perpetually wore these letters on his helmet.<sup>24</sup> Constantine also later “made use of other talismans of Christian character—such as nails from the Redeemer’s Cross. One such nail he set in his golden diadem, with its jeweled mount, another in the snaffle of his war horse.”<sup>25</sup> Constantine never shook the pagan influence concerning the sign and his belief that talismans as such could protect him and lead him to victory. In this regard, “the Christianity of Constantine, then, was not wrapped in the glory of the true Christian spirit, but in darkness of superstition,”<sup>26</sup> which is the hallmark of paganism.

Constantine’s usage of his mysterious, magical *chi-rho* sign marks a watershed event in mainstream Christendom where it becomes acceptable to incorporate various aspects of paganism into Christianity. This specific import of paganism into the church, whether from false or pure motives, or pure ignorance on Constantine’s part, still carries on in certain Christian churches today, especially in Roman Catholicism. An example is the crucifix—that the symbol of Jesus hanging on the cross can be used to ward off evil spirits or be wielded as a helpful tool in exorcisims. The Roman Catholic use of holy water and its history of relics undoubtedly find their origin in pagan import—most likely traced back to Constantine’s pagan convictions. As Dracula said in the movie *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* when he had a crucifix pulled out on him, “Do not put your faith in such trinkets of deceit!”

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 47.

<sup>23</sup> Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Alfoldi, *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



It is very easy to imagine how someone like Constantine, with such a high position, and such a steeping in paganism, could not cleanly break from his pagan past and beliefs. Consider that Constantine's world view (and the whole of the Roman Empire) until his conversion is one of full-blown paganism, where gods are sought for aid in battle among other things. The entire Roman Empire is worshipping gods in temples and offering them sacrifices; this is normal everyday life. For some people, a break with the old way of life is very difficult. For an emperor of Rome, the break would be even harder—not just the basic belief in God, but in the follow-up shedding lifelong pagan practices. What would have happened if Constantine did not associate the *chi-rho* with Christ, but some other god? The world would be very different.

Constantine's conversion is not one marked by biblical example. Yes, Eusebius may have been reaching for a Pauline parallel in his embellished account of the vision and radical change of mind about Christ for Constantine, but if Lactantius' account is correct, there was no vision, only a dream. The report from Eusebius detailed above that Constantine called Christian leaders to him who informed him about Christ does not give full enough details to know for sure what things he was told. Unless taught by a very nervous group of Christian leaders unexpectedly summoned to Constantine who told him exactly what he wanted to hear, it seems hard to believe that they would confirm to him that Jesus appeared to him to tell him to worship a sign that would give him victory in war. His kind of conversion is unprecedented in Scripture. It is too reminiscent of his vision of Apollo. It appears Constantine received a weak conversion foundation that did not prepare him for the commitment he made. This plays out in how, once Constantine gave religious freedom to Christianity, it was easy to become a Christian, thus giving way to people becoming Christians without total commitment to Christ when it is easy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> James North, *A History of the Church: From Pentecost to Present* (Joplin: College Press, 1983), 73.

Another important consideration in Constantine's conversion is what he must have thought he found in Christ. Pursuing this line of thought will help us understand how he could claim Christianity while simultaneously having it mixed with pagan leftovers for the majority of his Christian life—even to such degree where scholars and historians looking back believe he was definitely not a Christian. As the data thus far suggests, Constantine came to Jesus Christ in the same way he had come to belief in his previous pagan gods. He was looking for a god to aid him, this time specifically in a battle. He was beseeching the divine to help him. In his mind, when he has his vision and dream, he is thinking a new god is showing him favor. He is likely thinking that he has found a new god who will require sacrifices and will show favor based on his good pleasure. Constantine likely placed this Jesus exactly on the same level as his other gods in his understanding. He probably wondered why there are no temples devoted to Jesus where incense is offered and prostitutes await. Despite whatever exposure to Christianity he may have had from the Christian Lactantius (who was his son Crispus' tutor) even possibly as early as 310,<sup>28</sup> any concern or sympathy for Christian persecution in general was “founded in a practical desire to ensure divine favour for his own enterprises.”<sup>29</sup> Constantine understood the Christian God just as his other gods.

With his perspective on the gods as his background, when he meets with Christian leaders who begin telling him about Christ and interpreting the sign in his vision and dream, they are probably to him like the priests of a Roman pagan cult. They have a teaching that must be believed, perhaps some rules to adhere to to keep on good terms with the deity, but also a teaching that Jesus is the true God of gods and the others are false. Whether Constantine buys fully into the idea that Jesus is God over all can only be seen by his future actions. Yes, he goes

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Roman Emperor, Christian Victor*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

on and kills Maxentius, and this solidifies his belief that Jesus gave him his favor through a magical sign. He must have thought Jesus was what his priests said about him. He must be the one god over all others. Constantine's buy-in is seen in his triumphal entry.

When Constantine defeats Maxentius, he comes to Rome the next day in triumph: "There were the usual games, appearances before the Senate, distributions to the people, but no sacrifice."<sup>30</sup> The lack of sacrifice is huge: it indicates Constantine's strong buy-in to Jesus as the God of all, as sacrifice after victory was an obligatory rite of the pagan cult.<sup>31</sup> By this action Constantine showed he would not sacrifice to pagan gods anymore, and he never did again.<sup>32</sup>

Other fruits also show Constantine's change from worshipping pagan gods to the God of Christianity. Constantine showed huge favors to the Christians who made up approximately 10% of the Roman population at that time, risking a potential upheaval from the other pagan 90%.<sup>33</sup> He issued the Edict of Milan calling for religious freedom for all, specifically stipulating the Christians.<sup>34</sup> He ordered church lands returned to their owners, public relief distributed through the Bishop of Carthage, and exempted clergy from various public services.<sup>35</sup> He granted large gifts of money to churches for building programs, as well as tax exemptions to the Christian clergy.<sup>36</sup> He gave the Lateran Palace to the Bishop of Rome along with the grounds of the Praetorian Guard; he erected St. John's Lateran on those grounds.<sup>37</sup> Also, "Bishops were appointed to an elevated social status with important state roles (they were judges in the courts). Christianity enjoyed imperial protection."<sup>38</sup> He put Christian symbols on imperial coinage as

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<sup>30</sup> James North, *A History of the Church*, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church*, 47.

<sup>32</sup> James North, *A History of the Church*, 79.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>38</sup> Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church*, 49.

early as 314.<sup>39</sup> His old patron god Sol Invictus “began to disappear from the coins by 321, and by 323 all pagan symbols were removed from the coins.”<sup>40</sup> Churches were given the right to inherit property. He had his children educated as Christians. He denounced and prohibited certain pagan rituals.<sup>41</sup> He ended up “Replacing the names of the Roman gods in official speeches or declarations with abstract terms..., ceasing to perform obligatory rites of the pagan cult (sacrifice after victory) and having coins minted with the labarum...on them.”<sup>42</sup> He suppressed sacrifices offered to him as part of the imperial cult.<sup>43</sup> He also provided Bibles.<sup>44</sup>

Constantine also delayed his own baptism until a short time before his death on May 22, 337.<sup>45</sup> As through church history to this time, baptism was universally held by the church to be for the forgiveness of sins, and Constantine believed this also. At the time there was a teaching that it was better to wait until the deathbed to be baptized—there would thus be no sins charged against you before entering eternal life and no formidable penance to do for such sins after baptism.<sup>46</sup> While this is poor theology, it does show Constantine wanted the forgiveness of his sins because of his belief and faith in Christianity. After his baptism he went as far as to refuse to wear the imperial purple and “left this life in his white baptismal robes.”<sup>47</sup> He understood why he needed to be baptized thus proving his faith and hope in Christ.

### *Fruits of Paganism*

For all that Constantine did that showed his faith in Christianity, he also had deep convictions of certain pagan beliefs and practices that he mixed in with it. Even though he took

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<sup>39</sup> James North, *A History of the Church*, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church*, 47.

<sup>43</sup> James North, *A History of the Church*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> John McManners, ed., *The Oxford History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>46</sup> John McManners, ed., *The Oxford History of Christianity*, 67.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 95.

certain steps against paganism in the Empire, he still allowed pagan institutions to remain as they were.<sup>48</sup> The case can be made that he never really abandoned sun worship in principle. He kept the sun on his coins and even “set up a statue of the sun god that bore his own image in the Forum of Constantinople.”<sup>49</sup> The Arch by the Colosseum depicts Constantine’s victory over Maxentius with an inscription “by the prompting of the deity,” referring to Sol Invictus.<sup>50</sup> In 321 he decreed Sunday as a day of rest, a legal holiday, possibly to honor the god Mithras, the Unconquered Sun.<sup>51</sup> He described Sunday as the “day of the sun.”<sup>52</sup> Excavations at St. Peter’s in Rome have uncovered a mosaic of Christ as the Unconquered Sun.<sup>53</sup> He also built a statue of the mother-goddess Cybele presented in a posture of Christian prayer.<sup>54</sup> He is further “reported to have had his eldest son, his nephew, and his brother-in-law executed.”<sup>55</sup> Far into his conversion he “still functioned as the high priest of paganism...[retaining] the pagan title *Pontifex Maximus*, which means chief of the pagan priests.”<sup>56</sup> He used pagan magic formulas to protect crops and heal diseases.<sup>57</sup> Constantine also subscribed to the pagan belief of relics. “The real floodgates of private relic owning were probably opened by Constantine himself.”<sup>58</sup> He transported relics “of the true cross” to Rome and Constantinople.<sup>59</sup> He reportedly “promoted the idea that the bits of wood that came from Christ’s cross possessed spiritual powers.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2008), 18.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 125.

<sup>51</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Virginia Burrus, *A People’s History of Christianity, Vol. 2: Late Ancient Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 195.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, 20.

Constantine also built church buildings following “the path of the pagans in constructing temples to honor God.”<sup>61</sup> His buildings were considered holy spaces as an import of the pagan shrine. He named his church buildings after saints, like pagans named their temples after gods, and built his first church buildings over the bodies of dead saints in cemeteries where Christians held meals for them.<sup>62</sup> He tied his building projects to tombs where martyrs were already honored.<sup>63</sup> Many of the largest buildings were built over the tombs of the martyrs because the martyrs were believed to have had the same powers they once ascribed to pagan gods.<sup>64</sup> Some of the buildings include: St. Peter’s on Vatican Hill built over the supposed tomb of Peter, St. Paul’s Outside the Walls built over the supposed tomb of Paul, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem built over the supposed tomb of Christ.<sup>65</sup> His churches were patterned after the model of the basilica (which was designed after Greek pagan temples), and he decorated them with pagan art.<sup>66</sup>

Before the time of Constantine, December 25 was the traditional pagan date for the birthday of the sun-god.<sup>67</sup> This was chosen because it occurs at the time of the winter solstice. At the winter solstice, December 25 is the first day when the sun can be perceived by human eyes to be moving back again; it is therefore quite fitting for the birth date of a pagan sun-god! Under Constantine’s reign, sometime in the early fourth century (although it is unknown who did it and where it first happened) the tradition developed where December 25 was now celebrated as the birth of Christ.<sup>68</sup> Whether Constantine was involved with this or not is unknown, though his leadership of pagan toleration and incorporation allowed for this pagan import to develop and

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Virginia Burrus, *A People’s History of Christianity*, 171.

<sup>64</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>67</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 126.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

stick. From what we have seen of Constantine's grasp on his pagan past, it is not a stretch by any means to conceive that Constantine allowed it and likely thought it proper.

Certainly Constantine's fruits of paganism cannot be denied. Just as the good things he did for the church were tremendous in setting the foundation for Christianity to become the world's foremost religion, so the pagan mixture he cured into that foundation was equally as devastating, and the ripples are still felt today.

### *Consequences and Conclusion*

The cost of Constantine's conversion is enormous. For those living in the Roman Empire, Constantine's conversion undoubtedly came as a shock and surprise to both pagans and Christians alike. The people would have viewed this change and promotion of Christianity as perhaps strange but par for the course, as a particular cult of a particular god might often be promoted vigorously by the emperor.<sup>69</sup> Constantine was only doing what had been done before by previous emperors in promoting his particular flavor of religion. Jesus was his new god who gave him victory in battle, and if it is good enough for Constantine, it is good enough for the Roman Empire. With this new god came a host of new converts from paganism. If the estimates are true that by the end of the century 90% of the Empire's population (50 to 75 million) was Christian,<sup>70</sup> what kind of conversion and conviction did the masses have? They most likely saw it as switching gods or cults, as they may have done previously. They also, like Constantine, likely retained some of their pagan practices and beliefs but now under the head of the true God in Christianity.<sup>71</sup> Full and complete repentance could not be accomplished for every new convert due to numbers alone. It was out of control. The shape the church took locked its converts into a system that was tolerant and accepting of pagan beliefs and practices. Constantine did not draw

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<sup>69</sup> Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> James North, *A History of the Church*, 87.

<sup>71</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 96.

the line deeply enough over paganism, but blurred it and made certain aspects of it acceptable. This is a result of his lack of personal conviction, which can only either come from ignorance or rebellion. If ignorance, it is because no one actually converted him, but he chose his new god and sign for worldly reasons, only later perhaps realizing what he had found, moving closer to truth. Because of this lack of conviction and knowledge, though, Christianity was forever stained with pagan influence.

In the argument of whether Constantine was really a Christian or not, examination of his conversion shows he at least at first likely “saw Christianity through Roman eyes as a cult religion and only later came to understand the significance of the creed in Christianity.”<sup>72</sup> This is the most honest and palpable position to hold, and the one that explains the evidence of his blended fruits of Christianity and paganism. He was a Christian who severely lacked in his personal discipleship with a pagan past that would not quit. He first thought of Christianity in terms of paganism, and his life from then was a slow move from paganism to Christianity, but never being able to fully break free. He may not ever have really gotten it with a full-on conviction as exemplified in the New Testament; this is what causes the polarized opinions of scholars and historians looking back. His life may not have been exemplary in all areas of faith and practice, but it sure is one today all Christians are all incredibly thankful for.

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<sup>72</sup> Norbert Brox, *A Concise History of the Early Church*, 49.



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