



EMPEROR CONSTANTINE 274-337

Up until about 64 A.D., most of the persecution that the early Christians suffered was at the hands of Jews. The Roman government did not usually get involved with the conflicts between Jews and Christians. But serious economic and social problems which were developing around 100 A.D. were attributed to the displeasure of the Roman gods. Several emperors ordered the persecution of Christians in the hope of making the gods favor the empire once again.

Emperor Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 311 A.D., instituted violent and systematic persecution of Christians. He gave co-ruling responsibilities to four leaders, and they all fought for power after Emperor Diocletian died. When Constantine and his troops marched to Rome to claim the prize of Roman Emperor, he faced a formidable opponent and needed spiritual strength. Constantine's mother, Helena, was a devout Christian; no doubt that she had an important influence on her son's life. According to historians, before the battle with his foremost adversary, Constantine and his army saw a vision of a cross and the words, "In this sign, you will win." He had the symbol of the Chi-rho inscribed on his army's armor and, even though outnumbered, he won the battle and was crowned Emperor.

One of Constantine's first acts in 313 was to issue the Edict of Milan, which gave civil rights and toleration to Christians throughout the empire. He contributed vast sums of money to build and repair churches, requested copies of the Scriptures to be produced for use in the church, held meetings to resolve church disputes, and convened the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. to define church doctrine. The Council was the first time that leaders from throughout the empire gathered to deal with church division and heresy. The resultant Nicene Creed is still an authoritative doctrine of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches today.

Constantine's Christian faith has been questioned by many, especially since he later executed his own son and wife for treason, and he himself was baptized only shortly before his death in 337. However, there is no doubt that God used Constantine's power and authority to help the church grow and thrive and become the main religion of the Roman Empire in the years to come.