

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Shared Past, Conflicting Future: Bishops, Constantine, and the Search for Higher Power

A look at the motivations of bishops of the Christian Church and Constantine and their relationship during the Donatist Controversy and Arian Controversy.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL SATISFACTION OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
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By

Eric Ge

Professor Jarett Henderson, Seminar Instructor

Professor Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, Mentor

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ABSTRACT

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Constantine I, the first Christian emperor of the Roman empire have been widely studied by historians. Historians have focused almost entirely on the “true” motivations behind Constantine’s religious policies and his intervention in church affairs. With their focus only on Constantine, many historians made false assumptions regarding Constantine and the church while ignoring the effect of the Great Persecution, the civil war, the disunity within the church, and the agencies of the individual bishops.

I will explore these ignored factors through the use of “church histories” written by Christians around this period, such as Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*, Lactantius’ *On the death of the Persecutors*, and Optatus’ *Against the Donatist*. These “church histories”, though biased at times, can offer a brief glance into the actual condition of the church during this time. I will also be using many letters written in this period by Constantine, and various different bishops and clerics as well as different imperial and church policies. These sources not only offer an account of what occurred, but through their argument and dictions, the motivation and circumstances of these Christians are also revealed.

In my thesis, by first exploring the Donatist Controversy and the Council at Arles, then the Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea, I will prove that the Great Persecution

spread mistrust among the Christian community, destroyed any unity that the Christian community had, and created great power vacuum within the local church leaderships. The spread of mistrust, combined with existing local tensions, exploded into massive infighting among the Christians for power. I will show that it was due to a lack of an empire-wide structure, the Christians were forced to look to Constantine for a temporary solution to their conflict. Constantine, long desired to assert himself within the church, intervened, placing imperial authority over religious authority. The conflicting motivations and authorities of Constantine and the bishops ultimately led to the bishop eventually forming a system without the emperor.

Constantine had just united the western half of the empire when the Donatist Controversy reached him. The harshness of the great persecution had turned many church leaders into ‘traditores’, or people who had handed over church scripture and property to the imperial government. The persecution and the formation of these traditores help spread great distrust among the local Christians, escalating existing local tension.

During the election of Caecilian, the bishop of Carthage, the Donatist bishops were cheated out of the election. The Donatists asserted election fraud, and that Caecilian was a traditore. Without higher authority, the Donatists were unable to remove Caecilian from power while Caecilian could not resolve the Donatists’ anger.

The Donatists appealed to Constantine as this higher authority out of necessity and desperation. Constantine, who needed support among the Christians and desired control over the church happily accepted. Constantine called for a church council to resolve the conflict. When the Donatist disliked the result of the first council called by Constantine, they appealed again, Constantine then overruled the first council and called for another. Then the Donatist

appealed again, and Constantine overruled the second council again. When Constantine intervened, he inserted his power into the church, when he overruled multiple church council, he placed his authority above those of the church.

The Donatist' focus on punishing traditores and re-baptizing tainted clergy fundamentally threatened existing church authority, the Donatist' challenge against the bishop of Carthage threatened the proto-tradition of metropolitan bishops, and the Donatists' endless appeal to Constantine allowed Constantine to threaten the authority of the bishops. Due to these factors, the council acted to protect the power of the bishops as well as the church. The council also passed canon law demanding loyalty to the church before the state.

The Donatist controversy exposed the church's weakness in the lack of empire-wide structure, and how without one, the church could not resolve its own problems and had to rely on outside intervention. Before Constantine could resolve the Donatist Controversy properly, war had broken out between him and his former ally Licinius, and Constantine marched off to war.

In the east, during the persecution, the bishop of Alexandria fled the city. Another bishop, Melitius took over his jurisdiction. Melitius was swiftly condemned by allies of the bishop of Alexandria. After the persecution, a theological dispute broke out between Alexander, the new bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, a priest serving under him. Alexander condemned and excommunicated Arius. But Arius sought out Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia for help. Eusebius allowed Arius back into the church and condemned Alexander instead. This led to both side amassing factions among the bishops of the east, condemning and overruling each other. Alexander shifted his attack from Arius to Eusebius, alleging Eusebius was attempting to steal his dioceses and assert his influence throughout the church.

Theological dispute between Alexander and Arius is an example of insecurity among the bishops. Accusation by Alexander against Eusebius' "overreaching" combined with prior canon laws regarding the same thing reflect mistrust and tension among the clergy. The same canon law and Melitius' action highlight some clergy's ambition for power. The Arian Controversy exposed the internal conflict and disunity within the church on every level. The mutual condemnations and stalemate of bishops exposed the weakness of a church without an empire-wide structure once again.

Constantine had just defeated Licinius and united the entire empire under his control. He once again needed supporters. The weakness and division of the church gave him the perfect opportunity. He intervened and tried to unify the church. The bishops only accepted his help because they desired to win against their fellow bishops. Constantine's call for unity conflicted with this desire. The bishops passed new canon laws to protect the powers of the bishops on every single level of the church. From disputed election to mutual condemnation, bishops always wanted more authority, they would have never been willing to share with Constantine. Constantine's attempt to insert himself into the church only demonstrated to the bishops how the church can and must function without him.

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Historical Characters

Roman Empire:

Flavius Valerius Constantinus: Or Constantine the Great, son of Constantius I, Emperor of the Roman Empire 306-337 A.D. Son-in-law to Maximianus, brother-in-law to Maxentius and Licinius.¹ Will be refer to simply as **Constantine** in the thesis.

Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus: Emperor of the Roman Empire 284-305 A.D. (served as Augustus of the East). Father-in-law to Galerius ² Will be refer to simply as Diocletian in the thesis.

Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maximianus: Emperor of the Roman Empire 285-305, 307-308 A.D. (Augustus of the West 285-305). Father-in-law to Constantine I and Constantius I, father to Maxentius. ³ Will be refer to simply as **Maximian** in the thesis.

Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximianus: Emperor of the Roman Empire 203-311 A.D., (Caesar of the East 293-305 A.D., Augustus of the East 305-311 A.D.). Son-in-law to Diocletian.⁴ Will be refer to simply as **Galerius** in the thesis.

Flavius Valerius Constantius: Emperor of the Roman Empire 293-306 A.D., (Caesar of the West 293-305 A.D., Augustus of the West 305-306 A.D.). Father to Constantine I, son-in-law to Maximianus.⁵ Will be refer to simply as **Constantius I** in the thesis.

Severus Flavius Valerius: Emperor of the Roman Empire 305-307 A.D., (Caesar of the West 305-306 A.D., Augustus of the West 306-307 A.D.).⁶ Will be refer to simply as **Severus II** in the thesis.

¹ Raymond Davis “Constantine I, Roman Emperor,” Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified July 30, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.1786>.

² Monica Hellstrom, “Diocletian, Roman Emperor, 294-313 CE,” Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22 2023, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.2187>.

³ Raymond Davis, “Maximian, Roman Emperor,” Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.4019>.

⁴ J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, “Galerius,” Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.2779>.

⁵ Raymond Davis, “Constantius I, Flavius Valerius, Roman Emperor,” Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.1790>.

⁶ Raymond Davis, “Severus Flavius Valerius, Illyrian Military Commander,” Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified March 7, 2016, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.5882>.

Gaius Galerius Valerius Maximinus: Emperor of the Roman Empire 305-313 A.D., (Caesar of the East 305-310 A.D. (maybe), Unclear from 310-313 A.D.).⁷ Will be refer to simply as **Maximinus Daza** in the thesis.

Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maxentius: Emperor of the Roman Empire 306/307-312 A.D., Son of Maximian, brother-in-law with Constantine I.⁸ Will be refer to simply as **Maxentius** in the thesis.

Valerius Licinianus: Emperor of the Roman Empire 308-324 A.D., (Augustus of the West 308-313 A.D.(maybe), Augustus of the East 313-324 A.D.). Brother-in-law with Constantine I, it is important to note that although Licinius was Augustus of the West, he never ruled or made it to the West.⁹ Will be refer to simply as **Licinius** in the thesis.

Controversy in Rome Under Maxentius:

Marcellus of Rome: Bishop of Rome till 308/309 A.D. when he was exiled by Maxentius. Marcellus preferred harsh and strict treatment towards traditores.¹⁰

Eusebius of Rome: Bishop of Rome after Marcellus, till his exile by Maxentius around 309 A.D. He supported lax treatment of traditores.¹¹

Heraclius of Rome: Rival of Eusebius of Rome till both of them were exiled by Maxentius around 309 A.D. he supported harsh treatment towards traditores.¹²

Donatist Controversy and the Council of Arles:

Main Characters of the Donatist Controversy

Caecilian of Carthage: The Catholic bishop of Carthage, ordained by Felix of Abthugni and others, after a contested election. He was accused by the Donatists as a traditore by association to Felix of Abthugni.¹³ **(Catholic)**

⁷ Raymond Davis, "Maximinus, Gaius Galerius Valerius," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.4022>.

⁸ Raymond Davis, "Maxentius, Marcus Aurelius Valerius, Roman Emperor, B.C. 283 CE," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.4018>.

⁹ Simon Corcoran, "Licinius, Valerius Licinianus. Roman Emperor," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3690>.

¹⁰ Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1981), 38. Damasus, *Epigrammata* 48.

¹¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 38. Damasus, *Epigrammata* 48.

¹² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 38. Damasus, *Epigrammata* 48.

¹³ Todd Breyfogle, W.H.C. Frend, "Donatists," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.2284>.

Donatus: Donatist bishop of Carthage as well as the leader of the Donatists after the death of Majorinus. Namesake for the Donatist. He led the Donatist petitions to Constantine.¹⁴

(Donatist)

Donatist Supporters:

Lucillia: A wealth supporter of the Donatists who was supposedly condemned by Caecilian before the controversy for overly worshipping the bones of dead martyrs.¹⁵ **(Donatist)**

Majorinus: The bishop of Carthage appointed by the Donatists to challenge/replace the Catholic bishop Caecilian. His origin was contested by the Donatists and Catholics.¹⁶

(Donatist)

Secundus of Tigisis: A leading bishop of the Numidians, and later the Donatists. He and others ordained Majorinus to challenge Caecilian. The Catholics accused him of being a traditore.¹⁷ **(Donatist)**

Others:

Botrus and Celetius: Two clergymen, who were candidates for the bishop of Carthage, who supposedly purposefully cheated the Numidians out of the election. It is unclear where they were from, and what position they held.¹⁸

Eunomius and Olympius: Two bishops supposedly sent by Constantine to Carthage to determine the true Catholic Church.¹⁹

Felix of Abthugni: One of the bishops that consecrated Caecilian to the bishop of Carthage, accused by the Donatists as a traditore during the Great Persecution.²⁰ **(Catholic)**

Maternus of Cologne: Bishop of Cologne, one of the three Gallic bishops sent by Constantine for the Council at Rome.²¹

Marinus of Arles: Bishop of Arles, one of the three Gallic bishops sent by Constantine for the Council at Rome.²²

¹⁴David E. Wilhite, "Donatus and Donatism," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified March 29, 2017, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8086>.

¹⁵ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, tran. & ed. Mark Edward (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), 1.15-1.17.

¹⁶David E. Wilhite, "Donatus and Donatism," last modified March 29, 2017, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8086>.

¹⁷ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.13-1.16, 1.18-1.20.

¹⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.17-1.18.

¹⁹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.26-1.27.

²⁰M.J. Edwards, "Optatus of Milevis, c. 4th cent. CE," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified March 7, 2016, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8015>.

²¹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22-1.23.

²² Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22-1.23.

Miltiades of Rome: Bishop of Rome, heavily involved in the bishop selection and decision making at the Council at Rome.²³

Optatus of Milevis: Christian writer, and Catholic supporter who wrote his *Against the Donatists* more than a half century after the actual events of the Donatist Controversy.²⁴
(Catholic)

Ossius of Cordoba: Bishop of Cordoba that was an adviser to Constantine, and was sent to Alexandria to help form a compromise during the Arian Controversy.²⁵ Some historians suggest Ossius of Cordoba played a bigger role in both the Donatist and Arian Controversy.²⁶

Reticius of Autun: Bishop of Autun, one of the three Gallic bishops sent by Constantine for the Council at Rome.²⁷

Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea

Main Characters of the Controversy:

Alexander of Alexandria: The bishop of Alexandria that came into conflict with Arius.
(Pro-Alexander)

Arius: A leading Libyan presbyter in Alexandria. He disagreed with Alexander of Alexandria on the substance of Jesus in relations to the Father. He is the namesake of Arianism and Arian.²⁸ **(Pro-Arius)**

Peter I of Alexandria: The bishop of Alexandria during the Great Persecution. He first fled Alexandria during the persecution, then later returned and was martyred in 311 A.D.²⁹ Will be referred to as either **Peter** or **Peter of Alexandria** in the thesis.

²³Todd Breyfogle, W.H.C. Frend, "Donatists," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.2284..>

²⁴M.J. Edwards, "Optatus of Milevis, c. 4th cent. CE," last modified March 7, 2016, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8015>.

²⁵Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, intro. tran. & comm. Averil Cameron, Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2.63. H. A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 250-251.

²⁶Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 217-218.

²⁷Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22-1.23.

²⁸David M. Gwynn, John Norman Davidson Kelly, "Arius, C.260-336 CE," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified December 22, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.774>.

²⁹Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201-202.

Eusebius of Nicomedia: The bishop of Nicomedia, an ally of Arius. He overruled Alexander's synod that excommunicated Arius. Constantine claimed he was a supporter of Licinius during the civil war. He was exiled at the Council of Nicaea.³⁰ **(Pro-Arius)**

Melitus of Lycopolis: Sometime spelled as Meletius. The bishop of Lycopolis, who took up Peter I of Alexandria's duty/authority when he fled Alexandria during the Great Persecution. He was popular within Egypt and ordained many clergy, even bishops during his time in Alexandria. His movement and the clergy he ordained became the Melitian or "Church of the Martyrs."³¹ Will be referred to as Melitius in the thesis.

Pro-Arius Clergy:

Aetius of Lydda: Bishop of Lydda, supporter of Arius.³² **(Pro-Arius)**

Athanasius of Anazarbus: Bishop of Anazarbus, supporter of Arius.³³ **(Pro-Arius)**

Eusebius of Caesarea: Christian writer during the third to fourth century, and bishop of Caesarea starting in 313 A.D. He wrote some of the primary sources I will be using, such as *Life of Constantine*, and Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*. He was a supporter of Arius before the Council of Nicaea. He was exiled at the synod at Antioch for his support of Arius. He switched side right before the Council of Nicaea.³⁴ **(Pro-Arius, then Pro-Alexander)**

Gregorius of Bertus: Bishop of Bertus, supporter of Arius.³⁵ **(Pro-Arius)**

Narcissus of Neronias: Bishop of Neronias, supporter of Arius, exiled at the synod at Antioch.³⁶ **(Pro-Arius)**

Paulinus of Tyre: Bishop of Tyre, supporter of Arius.³⁷ **(Pro-Arius)**

³⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205, "Letter of Constantine I on Exile of Eusebius, 325," translated from Gelasius, *Ecclesiastical History*, in P. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, Vol 1 (London: S.P.C.K, 1966), 137.

³¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201-202.

³² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in J Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend (London: S.P.C.K, 1957), 325.

³³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 325.

³⁴ Averil M. Cameron, "Eusebius, of Caesarea, Prolific Writer, Biblical Scholar and Apologist, c. 260-339 CE," Oxford Classical Dictionary, last modified July 30, 2015, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.2579>. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213-216.

³⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 325.

³⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

³⁷ Barnes 204, "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 325.

Theodotus of Laodicea: Bishop of Laodicea, supporter of Arius, exiled at the synod at Antioch.³⁸ **(Pro-Arius)**

Pro-Alexander Bishops:

Eustathius of Antioch: Bishop of Antioch starting in 324 A.D., replacing Philogonius who had died. A great supporter of Alexander.³⁹ **(Pro-Alexander)**

Hellanicus of Tripolis: Bishop of Tripolis, supporter of Alexander.⁴⁰ **(Pro-Alexander)**

Macarius of Jerusalem: Bishop of Jerusalem, supporter of Alexander.⁴¹ **(Pro-Alexander)**

Philogonius of Antioch: Bishop of Antioch, supporter of Alexander.⁴² **(Pro-Alexander)**

Others:

Colluthus: A bishop that was demoted at the synod at Antioch for schematism, it is unclear how he was schematism.⁴³

Lactantius: Christian writer and defender, a supporter of Constantine during the third to fourth century. He converted to Christianity later in life and taught at the court of Emperor Diocletian before the Great Persecution. Some of his famous works include *The Divine Institutes* and *On the Death of the Persecutors*.⁴⁴

³⁸ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

³⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 325.

⁴¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 325.

⁴² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204. "Letter of Arius to Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia, c.320," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5.1-1.5.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 325.

⁴³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

⁴⁴ Commentary from: Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, tran. & ed. J. L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), xxv-xxvi.

Introduction:

Introduction and Historical Context

“What have Christians to do with kings? Or what have bishops to do with the palace?”¹ Or “what has the church to do with the Emperor?”² supposedly asked by Donatus of Carthage against imperial intervention in church affairs in Africa. Constantine I, who ruled as the sole Augustus of the Roman Empire from 324 to 337 A.D., was the first Christian



Figure 0. 1.: Photo taken by Eric Ge, 2025, Imperial Medallion with image of Constantine I, The Walters Art Museum.

Roman Emperor. As the first Christian emperor, his motivations, intentions, and his effect on the Christian church have been extensively studied by historians. When I went to the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore in search of artifacts of Constantine’s reign, I spent a long time searching in their Roman exhibit fruitlessly. There were

statues of emperors that came before Constantine, and statues of emperors that came after him, but there was nothing related to Constantine. Just as I had given up hope and started to

¹Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22.

²Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 3.3.

enjoy the other exhibits of the museum, I found what I was looking for in the middle of the Christian and Medieval exhibit. The “unique” connection between Constantine and the Christian church has been so deeply rooted in the minds of historians that Constantine was taken out of his own time and placed among items that were from hundreds of years after his own time. Just as Constantine’s artifacts were taken out of their most associated exhibit and placed in another, historians had often taken Constantine out of his own circumstances when studying him. This deep-rooted idea of Constantine’s uniqueness had led historians to view Constantine’s reign almost strictly from a “Great Man” history perspective filled with hindsight and assumptions, and a lack of consideration for Constantine’s circumstances. While Constantine, his motivations, intentions, and his effect on the Christian church have been studied extensively by historians due to his religion and relatively successful reign, the bishops of the Christian Church and their motivations have been overlooked by historians.

The early fourth-century Roman Empire have suffered around a hundred years of war, both external invasions and internal civil wars, and saw the temporary formation of breakaway states like the Gallic Empire and the Palmyrene Empire. With the leadership of the empire changing so often, the emperors could no longer feel secure in their position. Favours from the gods had long been seen as essential to victory in battles and the stability of the Roman Empire; many emperors demanded mandatory sacrifices from their citizens to the traditional pagan gods in the hope of securing the Empire and protecting their reigns. The demand for universal sacrifice came into fundamental conflict with Christian beliefs. During some periods of mandatory universal sacrifice, Christians who refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods were arrested or killed. Other Christians who agreed to perform sacrifices and handed over church property were spared by the imperial government. But after the

persecution, these Christians were often considered to be traitors by their fellow Christians and were called “traditores”, or people who handed over. Many Christians saw these periods of mandatory sacrifices and the killing of Christians as periods of persecution.

One of the last significant persecutions happened under Emperor Diocletian, Constantine’s predecessor, who ordered the destruction of churches,³ the burning of Christian scriptures,⁴ the demotion of officials who were Christian,⁵ and the arrest of church leaders.⁶ The persecution was not enforced equally throughout the Roman Empire. Regions like North Africa faced much severe enforcement⁷ while regions like Gaul and Britain felt the bare minimum if any at all.⁸ The Great Persecution not only caused significant physical damage to the Christian church during the period it was in effect, but it also created long-lasting troubles for the Christian community for years to come. Constantine and almost all the bishops and Christian leaders during his reign, such as Eusebius of Nicomedia, Alexander of Alexandria, Caecilian of Carthage, and Donatus, all experienced the horrors of the persecution firsthand. The trauma and vacuum left behind by the Great Persecution would continue to reveal itself and haunt these men and the church for years to come during Constantine’s reign to help shape the motivations behind the bishops’ and Constantine’s decisions.

At the same time as the Great Persecution, a civil war was also brewing within the Roman Empire. When Emperor Diocletian came to power, he established the tetrarchy, which divided the rule of the Roman Empire among four emperors. Emperor Diocletian and

³ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 116.

⁴ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 116.

⁵ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 116.

⁶ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 118.

⁷ Commentary from: Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, xxi.

⁸ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 24.

Galerius ruled in the East, while Emperors Maximian and Constantius ruled in the West. By the time of the Great Persecution, the Tetrarchy of Diocletian was beginning to crumble.

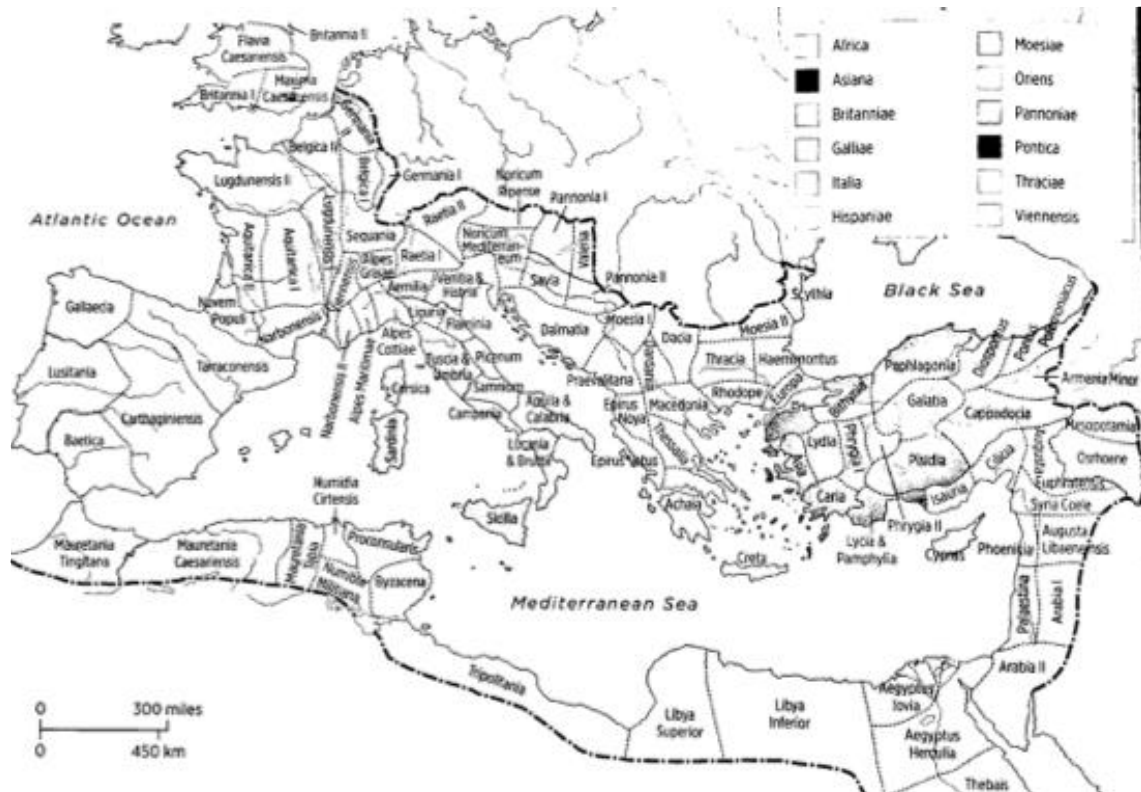


Figure 0. 2.: Map of the Roman in 294 A.D. under Emperor Diocletian, David Potter, *Ancient Rome, A New History*, 2nd edition, 2014, map, Thames & Hudson Inc, New York, New York: 288.

When Diocletian and Maximian retired, two new junior emperors were appointed in their place, Severus II and Maximinus Daza. Their appointment angered the son of Constantius, Constantine, and the son of Maximian, Maxentius. When Constantius died in 306, instead of letting the existing emperors appoint a successor, Constantine was proclaimed emperor of the West by his father's army.⁹ Soon after, Maxentius was also proclaimed to be emperor in Rome.¹⁰ Civil war ensued, Severus II was soon defeated by Maxentius.¹¹ Maximian, who

⁹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, tran. & ed. J. L. Creed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 24.9.

¹⁰ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 26.4.

¹¹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 26.8-26.11.

was proclaimed emperor once again during this period, was also defeated.¹² Galerius appointed Licinius to replace Severus II¹³ and died soon after. Licinius and Maximinus Daza divided his land.¹⁴ Constantine then defeated Maxentius and united the western half of the Roman Empire under his control.¹⁵ Then Constantine and Licinius formed an alliance through marriage and enacted the Edict of Milan, granting religious liberty within the Empire.¹⁶

With a temporary peace between Constantine and Licinius, a major church crisis, the Donatist Controversy, was brought to Constantine's attention. Around the same time, Licinius had defeated Maximinus Daza and united the eastern half of the Roman Empire under his control.¹⁷ Before Constantine could resolve the Donatist Controversy completely, his alliance with Licinius had fallen apart with war breaking out between the two of them.¹⁸ Constantine went on to defeat Licinius at the Battle of Adrianople and proceeded to unite the entire Roman Empire.¹⁹ Before Constantine could enjoy his new conquest, a second church crisis, the Arian Controversy, demanded his attention.

Historiography

Constantine and his policies have been the subjects of numerous studies by historians throughout history. One of the early modern historians writing about Constantine was Jacob Burckhardt, and his *The Age of Constantine the Great*, published in 1853.²⁰ Burckhardt

¹² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 30.5-30.6.

¹³ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 32.1-32.2.

¹⁴ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 36.1.

¹⁵ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 44.9-44.12.

¹⁶ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 45.1-45.3.

¹⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 47.1-47.6, 48.1, 49.1-49.7.

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 2.6.1-2.6.2.

¹⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 2.15-2.18.

²⁰ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 12-13.

approached Constantine through a decisively political view that is separated from religion and argued that Constantine had no religious intentions but merely did everything to gain political power.²¹ However, Burckhardt was heavily influenced by the political circumstances of his situation of ambitious politicians and a clear divide between church and state,²² and did not fully explore Constantine within his own context.

Another historian, Norman Baynes, provided a different interpretation of Constantine in *Constantine the Great and the Christian Church*, published in 1929.²³ Baynes argued that Constantine always wanted to support the church but, due to political pressure, had to do so in secret.²⁴ This interpretation is built on the assumption that Christians are inherently intolerant. Modern historian Harold Drake argues that Baynes still focuses on the idea that religion and politics are separate and uses politics to justify a religious goal, resulting in a conclusion that is “both inconsistent and incomplete”.²⁵ Both historians used relatively the same method, but ended with dramatically different conclusions, suggesting that they may already have drawn a conclusion regarding Constantine’s position on religion before setting out to evaluate their evidence. These two approaches to Constantine and the church, filled with preconceived assumptions regarding church and state and intentions, have damaged the idea of “political” in interpreting Constantine’s actions, with Drake saying that “the mere mention is enough to make Constantine scholars roll their eyes and inquire politely after the sherry.”²⁶

²¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 13.

²² Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 13.

²³ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 18-19.

²⁴ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 18-19.

²⁵ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 19.

²⁶ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 12.

Moving closer to the modern day, one of the most widely cited historians is Timothy Barnes, with many other notable historians basing their approach upon his. Barnes' approach uses the writings of Christian authors of the period, such as Lactantius, Eusebius, and Opatius²⁷, combined with his assumption that the Catholic church had already been well-established as a social force before the reign of Constantine,²⁸ and the assumption that Constantine was extremely well-versed in Christian doctrine²⁹ to form his interpretation of the relationship between Constantine and the Church.

Barnes' approach accepts almost all Christian writings as facts without sufficiently challenging them on their biases or intentions. Even when he addresses unreliability in certain parts of his sources, he does not apply the same critical inspection to the rest of the source. Many of his assumptions regarding the church's power, and Constantine's theological knowledge are also often contested by other historians.³⁰ Barnes' approach also takes advantage of hindsight too often, treating Constantine as the main character who had single-handedly changed Roman History. Barnes, who had treated Christian writings as fact, for some reason ignores the actions and intentions of these same Christians outside of their writing. He is following a kind of "great man" history, lacking much consideration for other actors.

Some historians built upon the approach that Barnes had pioneered. Historian Judith Evans Grubbs still uses the same approach to historical sources in her analysis of the edicts of Constantine but also challenges some of Barnes' interpretations by considering additional

²⁷ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 23.

²⁸ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 21.

²⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 56.

³⁰ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 28.

factors, such as the pre-existing social structure and Roman tradition, in greater depth in his analysis of Constantine's edicts which have long been regarded as influenced by the Christian,³¹ and in doing so, refute long-held misconceptions on Constantine's law on marriage.³² Grubbs also challenges the assumption that Christians had already become a majority in parts of the empire before Constantine's reign.³³ Historian Jill Harries also built her analysis upon Barnes' approach but also takes one step further and challenges the idea of Great Man History. Harries takes into account the influence that common people and organized groups within society could have on the decisions of the emperor³⁴, refuting the idea that all policies are all pieces of one man's dream. Harries also takes into consideration traditional Roman relationships that are beyond religion, such as the traditional patronage system, and their effect on imperial policy.³⁵ Historians Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall begin with the same approach as Barnes, namely, deeming Christian writings of the era of Constantine's reign worth reading and interpreting. However, they take steps further than Barnes with their interpretation. Cameron and Hall actively challenge the ancient sources. They point out possible disputes and inaccuracies³⁶ by interpreting the language of the original authors and the allusions they use³⁷ to try to determine possible motives behind the creation of these sources.³⁸

³¹Judith Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity: The Emperor Constantine's Marriage Legislation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 6-7, 13-14.

³²Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity*, 317-318.

³³ Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity*, 13-14.

³⁴Jill Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

³⁵ Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity*, 20.

³⁶ Commentaries from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 220.

³⁷ Commentaries from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 184.

³⁸ Commentaries from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 195.

Harold Drake takes a view opposing Barnes' approach of only focusing on the analysis of religion and primary sources. Drake argues that it is a mistake to use theological tools to interpret political problems. Politics and religion can exist at the same time without contradicting each other. During Constantine's reign, there was no clear separation between church and state.³⁹ Instead of supporting the assumption that Christianity is defined by intolerance, he forms his idea around the assumption that early Christianity is defined by the persecution that they suffered.⁴⁰ He sees the church not just as a religious institution but also as a social movement that played a role in Constantine's support base.⁴¹ However, Drake also stated that he chose not to focus on "prosopography, inscriptions, close analysis of texts for chronological clue."⁴² This refusal to use Christian writings from the late third and early fourth century led to Drake not placing his analysis in its proper historical context, resulting in his failure to consider some of the factors that may have influenced the actors within Constantine's reign.

The two modern schools of thought on Constantine and the Catholic Church of Barnes and Drake both approach the topic differently. Barnes' approach of using Christian writing as a source for his history has provided him with ample material to analyze, which allowed him to place his argument in its historical context better and to understand the motivation of Constantine better, but he failed to apply these same contexts to the creators of his sources, resulting in his failure to address the biases of early Christian writers. On the other hand, Drake does not like to focus on any historical sources, his consideration of

³⁹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 8.

⁴⁰ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 7.

⁴¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 29.

⁴² Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, xxvii.

Constantine's early experiences and the years of civil war could be further improved. In viewing Christianity as a social movement, Drake's approach allowed him to account for other influences that contributed to policy decisions that Barnes ignored. Barnes had also made too many assumptions about the Christian Church being extremely influential and well-established. Constantine was exceptionally well-versed in Christian doctrine. Drake made fewer assumptions about the power of the church and doubted Constantine's knowledge. Still, he went to almost the other extreme, removing nearly all roles the church played in its own future. Barnes' great man approach to history invalidated the actions of different actors within this period. Drake attempted to address this issue but did not accomplish enough. Both Barnes and Drake painted Constantine as too instrumental in shaping the Catholic Future and its future while underestimating the agency of the bishops of the Church.

Because they are so different, the two approaches have opened up a more moderate approach, an approach that can take into account the writings of Christian authors but also actively analyze them critically to read against them to determine their motivation and intended audience. By using these sources and works done by other historians, I will take into account the historical contexts of the third century and its effect on Constantine, the writers of the primary sources, and the Catholic Church, without the benefit of hindsight. My approach would try to make as few assumptions and use as little hindsight as possible. Rather than assuming the church as extremely powerful like Barnes or unable inspire changes by itself like Drake, I will take the middle approach of the church being powerful both politically and religiously on a local level but lacking in any empire-wide authority or unified voice, especially in the beginning of Constantine's reign. Historians see Constantine as either a devout Christian who was filled with knowledge of Christian doctrine, while others see him

as a politician who knew nothing of Christianity, with some historians picking out single words of Constantine's letters to justify their view. Constantine's political ambition and religious devotion do not contradict each other; they may even complement each other. The authenticity of Constantine's religious belief does not refute or confirm Constantine's political motivations. I will be taking a moderate approach to Constantine's knowledge of Christianity and not focus on the authenticity of his belief. By starting with understanding the circumstances that led up to this period and their effects on Constantine, the bishops, and the church, approaching the topic without assumptions about Christian doctrine, the degree of the power the Church possesses, and Constantine's knowledge, and treating Constantine as just any other Roman emperor, I can efficiently explore the agency of the bishops and Christians within the church and give a voice to a critical player that had been largely ignored in favor of Constantine's decisive power.

Methodology and Sources

Not many primary sources regarding Constantine's reign have survived. Those that do include "histories" written by mostly Christians, official and private letters among Roman officials and religious leaders, and legal codices compiled long after Constantine's reign. For example, *Theodosian Code* preserved some of Constantine's policies as he set them out in his edicts. However, since the *Theodosian Code* was compiled long after Constantine's reign, many of his policies were no longer in effect and were excluded from the codex, especially all the legislations before 312. Even the policies that are included are often incomplete or cut apart and placed in different sections due to the need for the compiler of the codex to

organize policies into specific sections and save space.⁴³ The compilers often deleted the intentions and reasoning behind the policies in an effort to save space, but this incomplete preservation of Constantine's policies had often led to misinterpretations by past historians. Therefore, it is important to place these policies within their historical and physical context before interpretation can be done. Luckily, the holes left by the codices can often be filled by the many church "histories" written about this period. Many Church "histories" contain quotations of Constantine's policies and letters, which can provide brief insights into Constantine's intentions or at least what he wished the public to believe. Besides these direct quotations relating to Constantine, the writings of these Christian writers can also reveal the view of the people under Constantine's reign and the circumstances they were in. With modern historians either treating primary sources written by Christian writers as too biased to serve as evidence and largely tossed aside or putting them on top of a pedestal and treating them as totally reliable, my method will also include a critical reading of primary sources written by Christian authors, such as Eusebius of Caesarea's *Life of Constantine* and *Ecclesiastical History*, Lactantius' *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, and Optatus' *Against the Donatists*. My method will not only focus on what "historical facts" these writings include but also on what arguments and comparisons the authors chose to make, how they made them, why they made them, and what had they purposefully left out. Many of these authors are extremely biased, and their intentions and intended audience must be explored fully. Through this method, I can obtain a better understanding of the circumstances these

⁴³ John Matthews, *Laying Down the Law: A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 57-71.

authors lived in, their central belief, and their motivation in a time of shifting political alliances, constant warfare, and lingering shadows of religious persecution.

Further, I will also explore secondary sources analyzing policies passed by Constantine and the circumstances of the church controversies to have a better understanding of the circumstances and chain of events that led to conflicts within the church, their resolution and results, and Constantine's decision to determine his intentions. An example of this would be Mark Edwards' analysis of the Donatists Controversy and how urban and rural factions within the Christians played an essential role within the conflict that is beyond theology⁴⁴. These secondary sources will include commentaries from translators of these original primary sources who are well-respected historians such as S.G. Hall and Averil Cameron, and additional secondary sources will consist of works by the same historians and works cited by these historians, such as Judith Evans Grubbs who was cited by Hall and Cameron, and who in turn cites John Matthews and Timothy Barnes, who were also cited by Hall and Cameron.

Thesis Statement and Structure

The civil war and the Great Persecution lingered on the minds of Constantine and the bishops. The consequences of the Great Persecution had begun to show themselves even before the persecution had ended. Chapter one of my thesis will explore the Donatist Controversy and the events leading up to the Council at Arles and the consequences of it. When dealing with the church, I will focus on pre-existing tensions among the factions

⁴⁴ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 2.1.

involved in the controversy, the effect of the Great Persecution on these Christians, and the motivations of the bishops who made the decision at the different councils throughout the controversy. Regarding Constantine, I will focus on the unique location where the controversy took place, Constantine's lack of supporters and excuse to intervene in church affairs, and finally his attempt to place imperial authority over church authority and the precedent these actions created. The two perspectives will be linked through the church's desire for a central authority and Constantine's need for an excuse to intervene in the church. Chapter two of my thesis will explore the Arian Controversy and the events that led up to the Council of Nicaea. I will explore the same effects of location, support, and authority from the perspective of Constantine. I will also focus on the effect of the persecution both during and after it had ended, the wide-spread mistrust and conflict between Christians on every level of the church, and the bishops' intention in attending the Council of Nicaea. Then I will explore the differences and similarities between Constantine's actions and motivations, as well as the motivations of the bishops between the two controversies. My focus on the dual perspective of both Constantine and the bishops of the church includes one of the main actors of the conflict who had long been ignored.

Pre-existing tensions had long existed within some Christian communities before the Great Persecution. The formation of "traditores" within the church, especially among ranking clergy, as a direct result of the persecution, spread further mistrust among the Christians. The Great Persecution's targeting of church leaders left behind a great power vacuum within the local church structure. The seizure of church property, and Constantine's order to restore it had given the clerics great financial motivations to fight to fill the power vacuum left behind, if power itself was not enough already. Pre-existing tensions, mistrusts, and desire for wealth

and power combined to create wide-spread conflict within some Christian communities, with contested elections and accusations of election fraud followed by violence being commonplace. Due to their religious significance as the leader of their local region, and the lack of an empire-wide church structure to oversee them, the accusations of election fraud, no matter how truthful, remained powerless to remove them from power. This is when the Christians turned to accusations of “traditores” and theological debates as the perfect weapons not only condemned other clerics secularly, but also religiously. Without an empire-wide structure to follow through and enforce these accusations, even these proved to be fruitless, and this is when the bishops of the church began looking for a source of higher authority. Constantine had earned his title of emperor through civil war, the fall of his predecessors was still fresh on his mind and his own security remained his main motivation. In his newly conquered territories, he still had a lack of supporters, in many cases the supporters of his political enemies still remained. Constantine saw the social movement aspect of the Christian Church as a great tool for him to obtain support, but he lacked the excuse to directly intervene and control the church. After all, the Roman government had persecuted Christians just a few years earlier. When Christian civil unrest broke out at the edge of his control, Constantine needed to act swiftly to secure his reign, but he also saw his opportunity to intervene in church affairs. The bishops of the church, desperately wanting to destroy their opponents, gladly accepted Constantine’s intervention. But they soon realized that Constantine’s goals differed and conflicted with theirs. Constantine’s intervention and conflicting motivations shown the bishops realize that the church cannot always depend on Constantine as the higher authority that they needed, and that the bishops need to assert their own authority independent of the emperor. At the same time, Constantine’s style of

intervention, the councils of bishops from across the empire served as an example to the bishops on what an empire-wide church structure and authority could be.

Chapter I – Desperate Plea and Delighted Acceptance:

Introduction

One of the first Christian controversies Constantine had to face reached him just after he had defeated Maxentius and united the western part of the Roman Empire. The Donatist Controversy that took place primarily in Africa divided the local Christian community into two major factions, the Donatists and the Catholics. The Catholics were mostly supporters of the newly ordained bishop of Carthage, Caecilian, while the Donatists were mostly composed of enemies of Caecilian, and supporters of Majorinus, who was ordained after Caecilian by his enemies to also become bishop of Carthage.¹ Majorinus was later succeeded by Donatus. On the surface of the controversy, the arguments between the two sides seemed to focus on “traditores” and re-baptisms, but on a deeper level, the two sides were struggling over influence and wealth while using religious doctrine as a weapon. The effects of the Great Persecution of Christians under Emperor Diocletian in Africa, the locations where the controversy took place and where the two opposing sides were located, the desire for power and wealth, the lack of opportunity for promotion within the church, the inability of

¹Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.19-1.20.

Christians to resolve issues involving bishops on a local level, and the civil war that Emperor Constantine had fought and was still fighting, all played a role in Emperor Constantine's, The Donatists' and the Catholics' actions and shaped and escalated this conflict.

The Storm after the Persecution

To fully understand the conflict between the Donatists and the Catholics, one must start with the consequences of Diocletian's persecution of Christians. During the later part of his reign, Emperor Diocletian passed many persecutory policies against Christians. These included: burning churches, seizing church properties, demoting all government officials who were Christians,² arresting of church leaders,³ who were released if they agreed to sacrifice to traditional Roman Gods,⁴ and finally, demanding universal sacrifice⁵. The persecution was not equally enforced throughout the empire, with it loosely enforced in Gaul by Constantius⁶ and severely enforced in Africa.⁷ The persecution launched by Emperor Diocletian provided the opportunity and some the motivations for a struggle for power within the local African churches that eventually resulted in the Donatist Controversy. Two policies that played an essential role in setting the stage for the Donatist Controversy were the policy that targeted church leaders for arrest and the policy that allowed church leaders to be released if they sacrificed to pagan gods. Targeting of Church leaders not only brought chaos resulting from local Christians losing someone to lead and teach them religious doctrine, but it also meant a power vacuum being created within the leadership of the local church. The sheer severity of

² Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 116.

³ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 118.

⁴ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 119.

⁵ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 120.

⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 24.

⁷ Commentary from: Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, xxi.

the persecution in Africa would suggest that a major power vacuum was created within the church in Carthage and the rest of the provinces of Africa. Within the church structures, bishops were appointed for life, with many priests and other lower clerics serving under them. The bishops' life appointments created a lack of opportunity for many priests and other clerics to be promoted. Not only did a cleric have to wait for a bishop to die to have an



opportunity for promotion, but they also had to compete with many others who had also been waiting for the promotion. The Great Persecution may have been a godsend for some clerics who had been waiting for their entire lives to be promoted. The major power vacuum within Carthage and the rest of the provinces of Africa suddenly created many opportunities for the surviving clerics to move up within the ranks of the church, and many clerics would have seized on these

opportunities to do whatever they could to be promoted, even against their fellow Christians.

The release of church leaders who sacrificed to pagan gods also created further problems within the church in Africa. Historian Min Seok Shin argues that Diocletian's intention

behind this act was to weaken the bond within Christian communities by highlighting that all church leaders that were released had essentially betrayed the faith.⁸ Although it is debatable if this sowing of mistrust and weakening of bonds among the Christians was Diocletian's actual intention behind this particular policy, it is clear that it most likely did have this effect within the community that was later on seized by both the Donatists and the Catholics.⁹ In Africa, after the persecution, all these factors left behind a Christian community that was purged of most of its leadership, with little trust remaining toward the surviving church leadership. The void and distrust left behind formed a great power vacuum that resulted in a great opportunity for someone to seize control of the local church leadership within Africa and set the stage for the power struggle between the Donatists and the Catholics.

Other measures of the persecution also provided great financial motivation for the conflict. During the persecution, the Roman government seized valuable church properties, such as gold and silver liturgical objects, alongside religious scriptures.¹⁰ For example, A list of treasures confiscated from a nearby church in Cirta included “two gold chalices, six silver chalices, six silver urns, a silver cooking pot, seven silver lamps...”¹¹ and many other items. After Constantine rose to power, he proclaimed that all properties of the church must be restored, and properties seized from Christians during the persecution should also be returned to them. If they were no longer alive and had no heirs, these properties would go to the church.¹² With a pound of gold being valued at a maximum of 50,000 denarii, and an average

⁸ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 120.

⁹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.13-1.14, 1.19-1.20.

¹⁰ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22-1.23. 17-18.

¹¹ “Proceedings Before the Counsular Zenophilus” from: Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 154.

¹² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, tran. C.F. Cruse (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 1998), 10.5.9-10.5.14.

income of 50 denarii for artisans,¹³ the churches of Africa would have been entitled to a massive compensation from the Roman Government. Further, during the persecution, the bishop of Carthage at that time distributed a large amount of gold and silver that the church owned to “faithful seniors,” hoped for the valuables to avoid confiscation by the imperial government, and planned for them to be gathered back into the church’s ownership after the persecution was over.¹⁴ The church in Carthage was wealthy, and whoever would become the new bishop of Carthage would become the custodian of a tremendous amount of wealth from both the imperial government and from the properties that were hidden away. The persecution had provided great financial motivation for people to struggle over the position of bishop of Carthage.

Besides financial motivations, tensions between the people who eventually formed part of the Donatists and part of the Catholics in Carthage most likely existed long before the doctrine controversy. The two groups occupied completely different regions within the provinces of Africa. The Catholics were based mostly in the city of Carthage, a major urban center and capital of the province, while the Donatists were mostly based in Numidia, a less urban and more remote area. The regional differences suggest that alongside the argument over doctrine, local regional tension could have also been a main driving force behind the conflict. Historian Coleman-Norton suggests that this regional tension may have existed since the mid-third century.¹⁵ This tension was demonstrated when Optatus insulted Donatists for being from a very remote and small area of Africa.¹⁶ This regional tension can also be

¹³ Shin, *The Great Persecution: A Historical Reexamination*, 110-111.

¹⁴ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.17-1.18.

¹⁵ Commentary from: Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 49.

¹⁶ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 2.1.

seen when the Donatists rioted when two outside bishops, Eunomius and Olympius, were sent to Africa to take charge and help resolve the issue.¹⁷ Further, there were also likely concerns over the authority of the bishop of Carthage over Numidia and the participation of Numidian bishops in the election of the bishop of Carthage. The role of the bishop of Carthage was a powerful one, even outside of Carthage. There must be a logical reason as to why it was traditional for bishops of Numidia to participate in the selection of and consecration of the bishop of Carthage.¹⁸ It is likely that the bishop of Carthage had some sort of authority over Numidia despite not being their bishop. The fact that Botrus and Celestius, two clergymen who were attempting to become bishop of Carthage, took pains to hold the election when the bishops of the Numidians were absent instead of openly preventing them from participating,¹⁹ and the fact that Caecilian could not object to the protests that the bishops of the Numidians had when they found out and objected for being intentionally left out further prove that the bishop of Carthage must have had some kind of authority over Numidia. The Numidian bishops must have resented Carthaginian authority over them, especially after they were cheated out of participating in the selection process of Caecilian. On the other side, even if the bishop of Carthage welcomed their authority over Numidia, they must have disliked Numidians' involvement in the selection of the bishop of Carthage. Historian Coleman-Norton also suggests that the Carthaginian clergy often opposed Numidian involvement in the selection of bishop of Carthage.²⁰ Botrus' and Celestius' actions highlight this point. The formalization of the authority of the bishops of

¹⁷ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.26-1.27.

¹⁸ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 214.

¹⁹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.17-1.18.

²⁰ Commentary from: Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 49.

metropolitan areas over the rest of the province did not take place till the Council of Nicaea,²¹ suggesting that this practice must have been taking place, but with no settled policy behind it. The fact that this relationship of bishop of Carthage having power over Numidia, and Numidians having some voice in the election of the bishop of Carthage clearly only based on tradition and not on formal rules boosted disdain for each other on both side of the conflict long before the Donatist Controversy. The fact that the Numidian bishops were not consulted in the selection of Caecilian must have further exasperated this disdain.

A Tainted and Contested Election

With possible motivations and opportunities provided by the persecution, the election of Caecilian to be the bishop of Carthage became one of the major launching points for the Donatist Controversy. The details within the descriptions of the election of Caecilian reveal that the election was anything but simple. Without consulting the bishops of Numidia, Caecilian became the bishop of Carthage and was ordained by Felix of Abthugni.²² The bishops of Numidia were of course extremely unhappy, and according to Optatus, they and all the other people that Caecilian had offended in the past, including Lucillia, a widow that Caecilian had attacked for kissing a martyr's bones,²³ and the "faithful seniors" who refused to give back the wealth that was entrusted to them²⁴ plotted together and ordained Majorinus as bishop of Carthage.²⁵ At the same time, according to Optatus, the enemies of Caecilian, "decided from the fountain of their own crimes, which their numerous atrocities had turned to overflowing streams, the single charge of collaboration should be diverted against the one

²¹ "Canons of Nicaea" from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 427.

²² Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.16-1.18.

²³ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.16.-1.17.

²⁴ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.18-1.19.

²⁵ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.19-1.20.

who ordained Caecilian.”²⁶ Putting aside the question of which side actually “collaborated” during the persecution, the election and ordination of Caecilian was clearly filled with complexities and problems. Without even considering the specifics of this election, the election of bishops around this time would have been extremely contentious. Due to the bishops’ lifetime appointment, the opportunity for someone to run in an election for bishop would have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The winner of the election for the bishop of Carthage would be able to decide the power dynamic between Carthage and Numidia for decades to come. As to the specifics of this election, firstly, Caecilian was evidently not the only candidate running for bishop of Carthage: the sheer benefit of being the bishop of Carthage would suggest that at least several people would be running for the position. Botrus and Celestius were mentioned to have also wanted to become bishop of Carthage,²⁷ and it is possible that Numidia also had its own candidates. Further, it is alleged that it was Botrus and Celestius who ensured that the bishops of Numidia were not consulted,²⁸ suggesting that if a Numidian candidate did exist, they may have been one of the front runners. Optatus provided one of the only sources for this election in his book, *Against the Donatists*, written around sixty years after the persecution of Diocletian.²⁹ The book includes a pro-Catholic version of the Donatist Controversy and a variety of primary sources like letters between Constantine and the bishops.³⁰ Optatus himself was extremely biased towards the Catholics, as his book was written against the Donatists. The fact that Optatus did not list all of the candidates running for bishop of Carthage also somewhat throws the legitimacy of the process of this

²⁶ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.19-1.20.

²⁷ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.17-1.18.

²⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.18-1.19.

²⁹ Commentary from: Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, xvi.

³⁰ Commentary from: Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, xxvii-xxviii.

election into question. These facts reflect that this election was not a simple one, but a complex and contentious one with many different factions involved. Botrus' and Celestius' actions also prove that the election of Caecilian broke traditional norms when the bishops of Numidia were purposefully not consulted, giving the Numidians, and later the Donatists, a legitimate reason to contest Caecilian's position. There were also widespread accusations of corruption and bribery. It is alleged that Botrus and Celestius both bribed people during this election, as well as Lucilla the widow.³¹ Similar events can be seen in another election in Cirta that occurred not long before this one, where accusations of bribery was also alleged.³² These accusations once again contest the integrity of not only the election of Caecilian, but also suggest the possibility of wide-spread corruption within the episcopal ordination process throughout Africa, further creating tensions among the factions within the provinces of Africa. It is clear that almost no one trusted the local episcopal election system, nor did they trust each other.

Interestingly, throughout the Donatists' complaints and actions against Caecilian and the Catholics, be it in Africa or in the appeal to Constantine, even though they had legitimate reason to contest Caecilian's election, they never brought up any concerns over the election process of Caecilian. Instead, they focus on Caecilian's and Felix of Abthugni's possible disloyalty to the faith. The Donatists' accusation that Felix of Abthugni and Caecilian, by association, were *traditores* demonstrated how, without higher authorities, local churches were unable to resolve issues involving bishops. If corruption and bribery were so widespread in church elections, or at least widely alleged, within the provinces of Africa, and

³¹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.18-1.19.

³² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 55.

especially with the election of Caecilian breaking traditional norms, why would the Numidians and Donatists only focus on “collaboration”? The refusal on the Donatists’ part to officially question the election integrity of Caecilian suggests that such action was either ineffective or that they would be otherwise powerless in being able to remove Caecilian from power, probably due to there being no higher church authority to whom the Donatists can appeal to contest the election. It is unfortunate that since the position of bishop was a religious and holy position, the contesting of a tainted and essentially secular election seemed simply impossible. When an “interventor” was appointed by Secundus of Tigisis, the leading bishop³³ of Numidia who was supporting the Donatists³⁴, to help resolve this problem, the interventor was murdered.³⁵ It seems the only way that the Donatists believed that Caecilian could be removed from the office of bishop was to prove that he was a traditor, when all Christians would condemn him. However, even this did not work at the local level, when around seventy bishops from the surrounding area found Felix of Abthugni had collaborated, and therefore wanted to void Caecilian’s ordination, Caecilian still remained in power within the city of Carthage.³⁶ It seems that at the local level, since there was no one with a position higher than bishop who could regulate them, bishops could not be told what to do or be removed from powers. For the Donatists, it seemed easier to commit murders and establish multiple bishops to the same see than to resolve their problems with Caecilian. All these examples show that the church on a local level, without any outside authority’s mediation,

³³ Mark Edwards used the word “primate” which is essentially an archbishop, the position of “primate” may be an anachronism for this period.

³⁴ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.18-1.19.

³⁵ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 2.25-2.26.

³⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 56.

was unable to resolve issues, especially regarding the transfer of power, easily and peacefully. This inability can explain the Donatists' eventual appeal to Constantine.

Seeking Supports, Facing Threats

When the Donatist Controversy first reached Constantine, he had just unified the western part of the Roman Empire under his control. Italy, including the city of Rome and the provinces



of Africa, have been under the control of Maxentius merely a couple years before. There was no doubt that Constantine had a lack of support within the newly conquered areas and was desperate to gain any new supporters. According to

Figure 1. 2.: Map of Constantine I's territory progression, David Potter, *Ancient Rome, A New History*, 2nd edition, 2014, map, Thames & Hudson Inc, New York, New York: 301.

historian Timothy

Barnes, it is likely that Constantine alienated many residents of Rome due to his conversion to Christianity.³⁷ Constantine's desire for supporters can be seen in his policies, such as returning properties seized by Maxentius, recalling people exiled by him, and releasing people imprisoned by him.³⁸ And he purposefully did not diminish the standing of individuals, mostly aristocrats and senators, who had held office under the previous government.³⁹ All these policies reflect Constantine's attempt to obtain the favor of the

³⁷ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 44.

³⁸ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 44. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 1.44.

³⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 45.

people, especially powerful people, within the newly conquered territories. The Christian Church, although lacking in an empire-wide structure, had survived the Great Persecution and proved itself to be a powerful social organization locally. Even though Constantine had converted to Christianity at this point, it is still too much to assume that all Christians trusted him, given the prior administrations' persecution. At a time when Constantine was desperate for supporters, the Christian Church would have provided him with a powerful tool. The church's lack of empire-wide organization also created a power vacuum that Constantine could fill. But considering the last time the imperial government involved itself in church issues was when it persecuted them, Constantine must have felt that he had a lack of excuse to interfere in the church. The Donatists' appeal to Constantine for help to resolve their issue must have been the perfect excuse Constantine needed.

If Constantine had a lack of supporters within Italy and Rome, he must have even fewer supporters in Africa and Carthage. After Constantine defeated Maxentius at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, he sent the head of Maxentius to Carthage to gain the surrender of Maxentius' former allies in Africa.⁴⁰ Besides this one act, it seems Constantine did not fight or go to Africa before the Donatist Controversy. Constantine's lack of supporters within Africa and the location of Carthage, both in relation to both Maximinus Daza' and later Licinius' territories and Constantine's main forces, made the Donatist Controversy extremely dangerous. Carthage and the rest of the provinces where the majority of the controversy took place were extremely close to the border with Emperor Maximinus Daza,⁴¹ a rival of Constantine who had made an alliance with Maxentius before his death.⁴² Further,

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 45.

⁴¹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 36.3.

⁴² Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 43.3.

Lactantius, a Christian writer and fierce defender who lived in the third to fourth century,⁴³ claimed that Maximinus Daza's main army was stationed in Syria-Palaestina in early 313 C.E. and possibly during 312 C.E. as well.⁴⁴ After Maximinus Daza's defeat, Licinius inherited his territory. Although at this time Licinius was still allied with⁴⁵ and brother-in-law to Constantine,⁴⁶ politics during this time meant that no one could be trusted not to take advantage of the chaos. Constantine had literally just killed his father-in-law and brother-in-law a few years before.⁴⁷ Further, the extremely long distance between North Africa and Constantine's main forces in the North, combined with Constantine's lack of supporters in Africa and his absence from the province, would suggest that he had very limited capability in Africa. Christians had also often demonstrated their willingness to use violence, be it murders⁴⁸ or riots.⁴⁹ If a major civil unrest or rebellion occurred in Africa, it would have been near impossible for Constantine to resolve it without going there himself. It would be even worse if Maximinus Daza, and later on, Licinius, took advantage of the unrest in the borderlands to invade Constantine's territories. It would have been in Constantine's best interest to resolve the Donatist Controversy as peacefully as possible.

Searching for a Higher Power

The Donatists' appeal to Constantine further demonstrates the inability of the church to resolve issues involving a bishop. Before Constantine's and Maxentius' rise to power, the Christians of Africa suffered severe persecution under the imperial government. Therefore,

⁴³ Commentary from: Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, xxv-xxvi.

⁴⁴ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 45.2.

⁴⁵ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 49.1-49.7.

⁴⁶ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 45.1-45.2.

⁴⁷ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 30.5, 44.9.

⁴⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 2.25-2.26

⁴⁹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.26-1.27, Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance* 220. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 39, 213.

the Christians of Africa must have seen the imperial government as the enemy during the persecution and most likely did not trust the imperial government even after the persecution ended. Although there are evidence suggesting that Constantine had replaced top officials within Africa when he came to power,⁵⁰ it is unlikely that he was able to replace everyone. The same imperial officials that carried out the Great Persecution may still had been in charge during the Donatist Controversy. This would certainly create distrust between the Donatists and new Constantine government. The randomness and suddenness of Diocletian's persecutory policies in the middle of his reign⁵¹ and the fact that other emperors launched and stopped persecutions randomly would also highlight the unpredictability of Roman emperors and further compound the distrust Christians of Africa had towards the imperial government. Further, although Maxentius tolerated Christians in his territories,⁵² he did not seem to have much patience toward Christians, especially when it came to disputes among them. This lack of patience is demonstrated by his handling of some disputes within the church of Rome. When the bishop of Rome, Marcellus, refused to forgive "traditores", a dispute and riot erupted between Marcellus' supporters and those who had lapsed. Maxentius decided just to banish Marcellus.⁵³ After Marcellus' banishment, a new election was called, with Eusebius⁵⁴ and Heraclius leading two opposing factions still disputing the readmission of "traditores", which once again led to riots. Maxentius decided to just exile both Eusebius and Heraclius. ⁵⁵ Judging from past reactions of Maxentius, who ruled over the provinces of Africa before Constantine, the Donatists no doubt knew that appealing to Roman emperors

⁵⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 49.

⁵¹ Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, 11.1-11.8, 12.1-12.5.

⁵² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 38-39.

⁵³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 39.

⁵⁴ It is unclear who this Eusebius was. He is likely not the same person as either Eusebius of Caesarea or Nicomedia. This Eusebius was the bishop of Rome.

⁵⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 39.

carried a certain amount of risks. Donatists also seem to have had a strong sense of regionalism and disliked outside intervention of any kind. By actively seeking outside help, it is clear that the Donatists truly had no other option. At the same time, the Donatists' appeal to Constantine required them to overcome all the hatred they possessed towards an imperial government who had just persecuted them and ignore the mistrust that existed between them and the government. The Donatists', and in fact many Christians' mistrusts can be demonstrated by the fact that the Donatists and Catholics argued and condemned each other for appealing to imperial power.⁵⁶

The sheer amount of conviction required to appeal to Constantine suggests that the Donatists' appeal was one made out of desperation, where there were no other alternatives besides Constantine. This desperate petition to Constantine as a last resort highlights once again how local churches lacked the ability to resolve major issues on their own without outside authority. With it all but impossible to remove Caecilian from his positions, the Donatists decided to appeal to Constantine for imperial intervention, asking for Gallic⁵⁷ Bishops to help make a decision.⁵⁸ Constantine then asked the bishop of Rome, Miltiades, along with three Gallic bishops of Constantine's choosing, to hold a council to resolve this issue.⁵⁹ Either with or without Constantine's consent, Miltiades modified Constantine's orders, calling for fifteen bishops from Italy alongside the three from Gaul.⁶⁰ The Council of nineteen bishops eventually ruled against the Donatists.⁶¹ Although the Donatists' desperate plea to Constantine only asked him to intervene in the provinces of Africa, Constantine's

⁵⁶ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22.

⁵⁷ People from Gaul or relating to Gaul

⁵⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.21-1.23.

⁵⁹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 218.

⁶⁰ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 218.

⁶¹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.23-1.24.

actions can be seen as a challenge to the authority of the church empire-wide. It is already shown that besides proving a bishop had collaborated during the persecution, it was almost impossible to remove them from their position. Unless a bishop's faith can be challenged, it can be proven that they had betrayed Christianity and God, and they cannot be removed. Bishops from Gaul had no legitimate authority over the conflicts within Africa. By asking Constantine, either as their emperor or as chief priest of the empire, to send Gallic judges, the Donatists were claiming that Constantine had the power to grant these bishops the authority to remove other bishops from their position outside of their own dioceses. If Constantine can hand out these powers, that would suggest he also had these powers. By asking for Constantine to send Gallic judges, the Donatists essentially and accidentally accepted the fact that Constantine had the power to override the decision of the local Christian community and the decision of bishops. Their appeal can be seen as their admission that Constantine was higher ranking than a bishop and that imperial decisions can override church decisions. This admission must have been a shock to many Christians who had just suffered persecution by the imperial government. Although Constantine did not make a decision himself and called for a council of bishops headed by the bishop of Rome, Miltiades instead, the very fact that it was Constantine who made the decision to have the council should be problematic for many Christians. Since it was Constantine who called for the council, any decision by the council, be it for or against the Donatists, can be interpreted as having been made through the authority of Constantine. Further, the enforcement of the decision made at the council can be seen as not by the authority of the bishops but by the power of the imperial government. Many Christians would see Constantine's action of handling the Donatists' appeal and calling for the council as his exercise of his power over the church and making religious decisions

for Christians. The Donatists had essentially placed Constantine on top of the church hierarchy by petitioning him, which must have angered many Christians.

The council in Rome eventually ruled against the Donatists and declared Caecilian innocent⁶² with the Donatists blind-sided by the traditional Roman civil trial.⁶³ Miltiades and the rest of the council's decision could have been influenced by an urge to protect the church, an urge to protect their own authority, and tension between urban bishops and rural bishops. One of the actions of the Donatists called into question was the rebaptism of Christians and bishops.⁶⁴ Rebaptism calls into question the actions of tainted clergy, and if the actions of these clergy were valid, and more importantly, were the clergy that were ordained by these tainted clerics valid.⁶⁵ By accepting rebaptism, the church would essentially admit that nothing that these tainted clerics had done were valid, none of the clerics ordained by these tainted clerics were valid, and in turn, none of the new clerics' actions were valid, creating an endless cycle of invalidity that would have damaged the church structurally more than any imperial persecution would have caused. By ruling against the Donatists, the bishops were acting to protect the church as a whole. Rebaptism was something that the bishops at the Council at Rome would never have accepted. At the same time, they could not just openly forgive traditores. With no other options available, the only way was to declare Caecilian innocent and the Donatists wrong. At the same time, ruling against the Donatists allowed Miltiades and the rest of the bishops to protect their own authority. Gallic bishops may have sided with the Donatists, but Miltiades' action of summoning Italian bishops to secure the

⁶² Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.23-1.24.

⁶³ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 218.

⁶⁴ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.23-1.24.

⁶⁵ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 213-214.

decision of the council⁶⁶ proves that Miltiades aimed to control the outcome of the council. Some historians argue that Miltiades acted against the Donatists to protect his ally, Ossius of Cordoba, and in turn his own authority in the eyes of Constantine.⁶⁷ However, it is not important if Miltiades acted to protect Ossius of Cordoba; what is important is that Miltiades attacked the Donatists. The Donatists, by appealing to Constantine, had weakened the authority and the independence of the church and its leadership. By ruling for the Donatists, Miltiades would be formally supporting the idea that Roman emperors were able to override church decisions and weaken his own authority by encouraging more Christians to appeal to the imperial government to resolve religious disputes. Therefore, to secure his own authority, Miltiades ruled against the Donatists.

Even though when the case reached Miltiades and the rest of the council, it was regarding traditores, it is unlikely that Miltiades had been unaware of the problematic election of Caecilian and the authority of the bishop of Carthage that was at the center of the controversy to begin with. Miltiades was himself a bishop of a major urban center. By protecting the authority of the bishop of Carthage, he would be protecting his own authority over the rest of the province as well. Further, the three Gallic bishops, Maternus from Cologne, Reticus from Autun, and Marinus from Arles,⁶⁸ were chosen by Constantine. It is more likely that Constantine spent more time in major urban centers than rural areas while he was in Gaul. If these bishops were known and trusted by Constantine, it would suggest that they were bishops of major urban centers as well. It would be logical for these urban bishops to act to protect their own authority as well.

⁶⁶ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 218.

⁶⁷ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 217-218.

⁶⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.22-1.23.

The Second Appeal to Constantine

The Donatists, unhappy with the process and decisions of the council in Rome, appealed to Constantine once again for a new council.⁶⁹ Constantine agreed to call for a new council to be hosted in Gaul, summoning bishops from all the provinces under his control.⁷⁰ The new council ruled once again against the Donatists.⁷¹ Historian Harold Drake writes that “Constantine’s unilateral decision (to annul the decision of the council in Rome) does not receive much attention because the Council of Arles unanimously confirmed the decision of the Rome Council.⁷²” This point should be explored further; it seems that by appealing to Constantine again, the Donatists gave Constantine the opportunity to override the decision of nineteen bishops, once again boosting the authority of Constantine over the church once again and suggesting that Constantine had power over bishops. The Donatists’ second appeal and Constantine’s demonstration of his power over the church must have angered some Christians, especially the ones involved in the council in Rome, before the conclusion from the Council of Arles came out. The new council’s similar ruling to the council of Rome most likely resulted from the same reasoning that they also wanted to protect the structural integrity of the church as well as their own authority and independence from the Roman Government, but a new reasoning could be that they wanted to protect the authority of the church against Constantine by imposing the same decision.

Alongside the decision against the Donatists, the Council of Arles also made other proclamations with the aim of protecting the Church from the imperial government, unifying

⁶⁹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 219.

⁷⁰ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 219.

⁷¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 220.

⁷² Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 220.

the church further, and preventing similar election disputes from occurring. One rule standardized the date of Easter.⁷³ This decision can simply be seen as making the church more uniform and united throughout the empire. Another rule stated that Roman magistrates who were Christians must “be supervised by the bishops of the same place, and if they begin to flout discipline, only then should they be excluded from communion. And likewise, as to those who wish to hold state offices.”⁷⁴ By demanding that Christian Roman officials follow Christian doctrines before imperial policies, the council was asking for loyalty to the church before the state and was, therefore, an attempt to fight against the government’s attempt to place power over the church. And finally, rules were created so that “concerning those who in each place have been ordained as ministers, they shall remain in the same place,⁷⁵” and that “concerning those who brandish arms in peacetime; we decided that they should be barred from communion.”⁷⁶ in order to prevent the religious crisis in the provinces of Africa to be repeated elsewhere. The first of these two rules prevented ranking clergymen from moving around and becoming ranking members in other dioceses; this rule was clearly created to prevent similar problems that occurred in Carthage. By preventing clergymen from moving around and challenging the hierarchy and promotion of other dioceses, the rule essentially removes the possibility of a messy multi-candidate local election like the one that occurred during Caecilian’s ordination. The second of these two rules simply prevented Christians from bearing arms in order to prevent the bloodshed that had occurred in Carthage from being repeated. The Council of Arles, unlike the council in Rome, which was clearly dominated by Miltiades, also provided an example of what a national church structure and

⁷³ “Letter from the Council of Bishops at Arles to Silvester of Rome” from Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 187.

⁷⁴ “Letter from the Council of Bishops at Arles to Silvester of Rome” from Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 187.

⁷⁵ “Letter from the Council of Bishops at Arles to Silvester of Rome” from Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 187.

⁷⁶ “Letter from the Council of Bishops at Arles to Silvester of Rome” from Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 187.

decision-making process could look like. The Council of Arles, because it gathered representation from the entire western empire, was a major development of church organization.⁷⁷

Endless Appeals, Endless Power?

After the decision against them at the Council of Arles, the Donatists decided to appeal to Constantine once again, for a third time.⁷⁸ And Constantine, although claiming he respected the decision of the bishops at the Council of Arles in a letter, agreed to hear the appeal once again personally.⁷⁹ Constantine ordered an imperial inquiry into Felix of Abthugni, and by association, Caecilian, which eventually found nothing incriminating against either of them.⁸⁰ With the result of the inquiry in hand, Constantine decided to fully support the Catholics against the Donatists.⁸¹ The appeal by the Donatists gave Constantine the opportunity to assert himself onto the top of the church hierarchy once again, this time possibly overriding the decision from all of the bishops of the western empire. Drake says that Donatus was a leader's worst nightmare due to his being "charismatic, eloquent, tireless, and utterly convinced of the justice of his cause."⁸² However, in actuality, Donatus was one of Constantine's greatest allies because he kept on providing Constantine with the opportunities to assert himself in church policy and the excuse for Constantine to exhibit his power over that of the bishops. Although Constantine's final decision in the Donatist Controversy agreed with both the Council in Rome and the Council of Arles, he only did so

⁷⁷ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 220.

⁷⁸ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 220.

⁷⁹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 220.

⁸⁰ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 1.27.

⁸¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 221.

⁸² Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 212.

after he had essentially voided both of these councils by accepting Donatists' appeal and ordering an imperial investigation. One can argue that Constantine only made his final decision against the Donatists due to the result of the imperial investigation instead of any of the opinions of the bishops of the two councils, suggesting that Constantine placed imperial decision and power firmly above the decision and power of the church.

Imperial Versus Religious Authority

The Donatists provided Constantine with one opportunity after another to interfere in the business of the church. Due to the lack of national structure and organizational power, the church heavily relied on Constantine's ability to summon bishops to councils. But why did Constantine keep on calling bishops to councils instead of just making an imperial decision? Due to Constantine's dual role as both emperor and as the chief religious leader in the West, if he had just made an imperial decision when the Donatists first appealed, he would have made that decision as emperor and not as the leader of the religion. This contradicts Constantine's motivation to gain authority and support within the church. By using his authority to call for a council of bishops, Constantine combined his imperial authority with the religious authority of the bishops. Through sponsoring the council and enforcing its ruling, Constantine demonstrated his religious authority instead of his imperial authority, created precedence for his intervention within the church, and firmly placed his authority above those of the bishops.

The Donatist Controversy helped expose the weakness of the church structure, or the lack thereof, again and again. The church, due to a lack of empire-wide structure, resulted in a lack of oversight over local bishops, resulting in bishops that may have been elected through fraud unable to be removed from their position. This lack of power to resolve a hotly

contested election in Africa resulted in the situation escalating dramatically, with all the pre-existing tensions in the region exploding into a full-on schism. Due to the same lack of ability to resolve issues, the Donatists were forced to seek their own higher oversight, the emperor, to resolve their problem. This appeal to the emperor threatened the authority and independence of the Church empire-wide and the power of bishops within their local area. The councils called by Constantine provided an example of how the Church could organize and create a hierarchy above the local bishops that would have prevented the Donatist Controversy. At the same time, as he provided the bishops with a precedent on how to form an empire-wide structure, Constantine also provided himself with a precedent on imperial intervention in church affairs. Constantine's attempt to impose ever-increasing authority over the church, combined with the platform and system he helped to demonstrate at the Council of Arles, this resulted in the bishops of the Catholic Church realizing the need and possibility for the church to shift away from localism towards an empire-wide structure and hierarchy to fight against imperial encroachment. It is likely that Constantine's action to gain more control over the church actually pushed it further away. The stubborn Donatists never accepted Constantine's final decision against them. But Constantine never had the chance to enforce his decision as he soon marched to war against his former ally Licinius.

Chapter II - Conflicting Struggle for Conflicting Power:

Introduction

The second major controversy that Constantine was involved in was the Arian Controversy, which occurred soon after he had conquered the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Council of Nicaea, which was held in 325 CE¹ dealt not only with the Arian Controversy, but also a variety of other issues, including heretics and schismatics, internal church hierarchy and the date of Easter. The Arian Controversy started in the city of Alexandria seemingly due to a disagreement among the local Christians on theology but quickly spread throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire. The location and circumstances of the Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea, the actions of the many bishops of the church and Constantine leading up to the council, and the result of the council reflects the fundamentally different and ultimately contradicting motivations of the various bishops of the church and that of Constantine. By contrasting the Donatist Controversy and the Council of Arles with the Arian Controversy and the Council of Nicaea, I will demonstrate how Constantine's intervention in church issues and desire to use the church

¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214.

councils as an extension of his imperial power ultimately pushed the bishops of the church into desiring a more independent empire-wide hierarchy without Constantine.

Disharmony amidst Persecution, Strife upon Strife

The Arian Controversy had its origin in the city of Alexandria, in Egypt,² years before Constantine had conquered the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Under the reign of Emperor Licinius, the churches of the eastern half were still reeling from the Great Persecution launched by Emperor Diocletian and Galerius³. Many Christians were martyred during the persecution within Alexandria alone.⁴ Judging by the later emphasis on forgiving Christian clerics that have lapsed during the persecution,⁵ it is also likely that, along with the people killed, many Christian clerics also became traditors during the persecution. During the same persecution, the bishop of Alexandria, Peter I of Alexandria, fled the city when the persecution started, creating a great vacancy within the local church hierarchy. Peter of Alexandria later returned to Alexandria when the persecution temporarily stopped but was soon killed in 311 when the persecution started again.⁶ The persecution and Peter of Alexandria's absence created two major problems within the Christian community. Firstly, many within the Christian communities, notably the Novatians⁷, much like the Donatists, despite the urging of some bishops, refused to forgive the people who had either handed over

² "The Outbreak of the Arian Controversy, c. 318," from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.5, in Stevenson, A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337, revised W.H.C Frend, 321.

³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 1.13.

⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201.

⁵ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337, revised W.H.C Frend, 338. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201.

⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 202.

⁷ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337, revised W.H.C Frend, 338.

scriptures or sacrificed during the persecutions,⁸ this created a great divide within the Christian community even before the start of the Arian Controversy. Apart from dividing the Christian community, the Novatians do not play that important a role in the Arian Controversy. Secondly, the absence of Peter of Alexandria during the persecution allowed

Figure 2. 1.: Map of the Roman Diocese and Provinces in the East, Richard J.A. Talbert, *Atlas of Classical History*, 1985, map, Routledge, London:



another bishop, Melitius of Lycopolis, to move into Alexandria and take over Peter's role within the church.⁹ Melitius of Lycopolis started doing ordinations within Peter's diocese without his permission.¹⁰ Although many common, non-ranking clerics seemed to have supported Melitius, Peter of Alexandria and his allies strongly condemned Melitius for imposing his authority within Peter's jurisdiction.¹¹ Furthermore, the supporters of Melitius also shared the same rigidity that the

⁸ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 338.

⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201,

¹⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201.

¹¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201.

Donatists and Novatians had towards traditors.¹² These accusations of Peter towards Melitius and the differences between groups of Christians divided the church of Alexandria further between the supporters of Peter and the freshly ordained clerics and the supporters of Melitius, furthering the conflict within the church.

Besides these somewhat well-documented conflicts within the church, there is other evidence suggests widespread conflict and mistrust within the Christian community. Within the Canons of Ancyra in 314, it is stated that “If any chosen to be bishops but not received by the see for which they were named wish to invade other sees and use violence on properly constituted bishops and raise dissensions against them, they are to be excommunicated.”¹³ Since policies were most likely made for a reason, this policy highlighted two different problems the Christian communities of the East would have potentially faced. First, the idea that people who won elections to be bishops can be rejected by their see suggested that election disputes and lack for respect of election results within local churches were clearly present. Second, the canon emphasized what happened if a bishop invaded another bishop’s jurisdiction and used violence, suggesting that violence within Christian communities was present. The fact that this canon was needed suggests that both issues were common enough to pose a great threat to the church. The distrust within the church can be seen in a letter by Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, to the bishops of the East in the starting stages of the Arian Controversy, warning that “impelled by avarice and ambition knaves are constantly plotting to gain possession of the dioceses that seem greatest... I had to explain to your Reverence,

¹² Commentary from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 249.

¹³ Canons of Ancyra, c. 314-319,” from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 28-35, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 314.

that you be on your guard against such individuals...”¹⁴ Alexander of Alexandria accused others of plotting to steal his dioceses and warned others of the same plot. This accusation on its own seems very unrealistic. However, the very fact that Alexander of Alexandria was actively using this accusation of people attempting to steal rich dioceses suggests that this kind of incident must have occurred within the church before, and there was great mistrust within the church, or else it would have been very unbelievable.

New Empire, Old Threat:

Constantine defeated Licinius in 324 CE¹⁵ and united the Roman Empire under one emperor. It was at this time that the Arian Controversy and division of the eastern church became part of his responsibility. By the time Constantine ruled the whole empire, the churches in the East were already in turmoil. In order to handle the problems of the church, however, Constantine had to consider factors beyond those of the church. The Eastern Empire had been ruled for years by rivals of Constantine, men such as Galerius, Maximinus Daza, and Constantine’s former ally, Licinius, and had just been conquered. This circumstance points to not only the fact that Constantine clearly had a lack of support from the ordinary people of the eastern part of the Roman Empire, but also highlighted the fact

¹⁴ “The Arian Strategy according to Alexander of Alexandria, c.324,” from “Letter of Alexander”, in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 328.

¹⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 208.

that Licinius still had allies and supporters within the government and social institutions, including possibly the church. The fact that Eusebius of Caesarea claimed that Constantine purged eastern cities of prominent supporters of Licinius¹⁶ also reflects this likelihood. One must also consider if there were also widespread supporters of Licinius within the Catholic Church. The only fact that led people to believe that Licinius did not have allies within the church was that Licinius was claimed to have persecuted



Figure 2. 2.: Map of Constantine I's territory progression, David Potter, *Ancient Rome, A New History*, 2nd edition, 2014, map, Thames & Hudson Inc, New York, New York: 301.

Christians, and it was for this main reason that Constantine went to war against Licinius.¹⁷ However, evidences to suggests that Constantine went to war with Licinius for other reasons.¹⁸ Although Eusebius of Caesarea, one of the main sources for this period, claimed that Licinius persecuted Christians,¹⁹ evidence suggests that this claim may have been propaganda on Constantine's part. Constantine, I claimed that Eusebius of Nicomedia, a prominent bishop in the East, spied for and aided Licinius during the civil war.²⁰ If Licinius in fact persecuted the Christians, it is questionable whether a prominent Christian bishop like

¹⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 2.18, Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 210.

¹⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 1.49-1.54.

¹⁸ Nicholas G. Stevenson, *An English Translation and Commentary on Origo Constantini Imperatoris/How Constantine Became Emperor (The Anonymus Valesianus: Pars Prior)* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2014), 13.

¹⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 1.51.

²⁰ "Letter of Constantine I on Exile of Eusebius, 325," translated from Gelasius, *Ecclesiastical History*, in Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 136-137.

Eusebius of Nicomedia would have supported him. Even if Licinius actively persecuted the Christians, it is unclear to what extent and purpose he might have done so. Historian Timothy Barnes also suggests that Eusebius of Nicomedia may have had a familial relationship with Licinius' Praetorian Prefect and had left Nicomedia to move closer to Licinius' court.²¹ The presence of Licinius' allies within every level of society, including institutions like the church, and violent civil unrests within the Christian community suggest that Constantine could not sufficiently exercise effective control over the eastern half of the empire and may have felt insecure in his reign in the East. The killing of prominent people within the East, and conflict within Christian communities, who had already demonstrated their capacity for violence, would suggest that it is possible there were great civil unrest within the eastern empire. The provinces of Aegyptus,²² the location where the majority of the Arian Controversy took place, and the province of Syria-Palaestina²³ where much of the controversy spread into, were also essential to the security of the Roman Empire and Constantine's reign. The two provinces were on the border between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire, whom Constantine's predecessors had fought against time and time again.²⁴ Any civil unrest within these two provinces would have presented a perfect opportunity for the Persian Empire to attack.

A Divided Church

One of the main issues within the church that the Council of Nicaea attempted to resolve was the Arian Controversy. The controversy was essentially over the status of Jesus

²¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204.

²² Richard J.A. Talbert, *Atlas of Classical History* (London: Routledge, 1985), 177.

²³ Benjamin Issac, "Judaea-Palaestina," *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, last modified May 29, 2020, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.3500>.

²⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 19.

as the Son of God in relationship to the Father. Some argued that since Jesus is the son of God, he existed for a shorter time than the Father.²⁵ Others argued that Jesus was in no way less than the Father.²⁶ Still, others argued for a variety of different definitions in between these two poles. There are two different interpretations of how the controversy started. One interpretation is that the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, asked Arius, a Libyan presbyter²⁷ serving under him, regarding the status of Jesus and God. Arius gave an answer supporting the argument that Jesus is lesser than the Father, which contradicted Alexander's stance on the issue.²⁸ An argument between the two then ensued. Another interpretation suggests that Arius was having a private discussion with other clergy when he expressed his stance on the issue. The other clergy, outraged by this stance, reported Arius to Alexander.²⁹ When Alexander told Arius to stop spreading what Alexander considered to be a false argument, Arius refused. It does not matter too much how the controversy started because both interpretations lead to the same result: Alexander of Alexandria called a church synod of about one hundred bishops from Egypt and Libya to condemn Arius' views and excommunicate Arius and his supporters.³⁰ The fact that Alexander felt it was necessary for him to summon more than a hundred bishops to condemn Arius suggests the possibility that Arius' view may have been very popular within Alexandria. Arius' popularity is further

²⁵ "The Arian Heresy: Encyclical Letter of Alexander of Alexandria and his Clergy, c. 319," from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 322.

²⁶ "The Arian Heresy: Encyclical Letter of Alexander of Alexandria and his Clergy, c. 319," from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 322.

²⁷ Presbyter is like a priest.

²⁸ "The Mission of Ossius; Constantine's letter to Alexander and Arius, 324" from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 322. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 2.63-2.72.

²⁹ "The Arian Heresy: Encyclical Letter of Alexander of Alexandria and his Clergy, c. 319," from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 322.

³⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204.

proven after he was excommunicated: when he returned to Alexandria, he attracted a group of seven hundred virgins within Alexandria and threatened Alexander's supporters with violence in the streets of the city.³¹ Arius' ability to attract such a large group of supporters within Alexandria highlights the fact that Arius was incredibly popular within Alexandria. If Arius was this popular within Alexandria, Alexander could have felt threatened by Arius even before the controversy. Even before the start of the Arian Controversy and Alexander's and Arius' debate on theology, there is also the possibility that Alexander already disliked Arius, which may have led Alexander to react to Arius more harshly. Christian historians like to link Arius to Melitius of Lycopolis, suggesting that Arius was an early ally of Melitius³². Melitius' vast network of Christian communities within Alexandria and the provinces of Aegyptus³³ threatened Peter of Alexandria's authority, which in turn threatened Alexander, who came from the line of Peter. Arius may have even condemned Peter of Alexandria when Peter excommunicated Melitius. Taking into consideration of Arius' popularity in Alexandria, and his past relationship with Melitius, Alexander may have felt Arius' contradiction to him in theology was not just about religious doctrine, but an extra personal challenge to his authority. Alexander, who as bishop was superior to Arius, could have simply denounced Arius, but he also summoned a hundred bishops from Egypt and Libya. This move suggests that Alexander may have felt it was necessary to do so in an attempt to demonstrate authority and power on his part.

³¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205.

³² "Arius and his Heresy" from Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.15-1.6, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 321-322.

³³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 202.

Arius, after his excommunication and exile, sought help from Eusebius of Nicomedia, claiming that almost all eastern bishops, including Eusebius of Caesarea, Theodotus of Laodicea, Paulinus of Tyre, Athanasius of Anazarbus, Gregorius of Berytus, and Aetius of Lydda, supported him with the exception³⁴ of three bishops.³⁵ Eusebius of Nicomedia decided to support Arius and wrote many letters of his own to other bishops asking for their support of Arius.³⁶ Eusebius of Nicomedia's involvement seemed to anger Alexander greatly. After Eusebius of Nicomedia's intervention, Alexander wrote to other bishops, claiming that Eusebius of Nicomedia, as he did before, was attempting to exert authority over the church at Alexandria and while he was pretending to help these heretics, he was actually attempting to expand his own powers and trying to gain control of the whole church.³⁷ Then he writes that Arius had built "dens of robbers" and was after his dioceses.³⁸ These two separate letters reflect the fact that theology was not at the top of Alexander's mind; he only saw Arius as threatening his authority and attempting to take over his position as bishop of Alexandria. In the mind of Alexander, Eusebius of Nicomedia and other bishops' involvement, combined with past actions by Melitius, Arius' association with Melitius, the pre-existing mistrust within the Christian community regarding local authority, may have seemed like an organized attempt to take away his power. It is clear that for Alexander, it is no longer about theology but a fight for his position as bishop and his authority over Alexandria and Egypt.

³⁴ The exceptions being: Philogonius of Antioch, Hellanicus of Tripolis, Macarius of Jerusalem. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204.

³⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 204.

³⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205.

³⁷ "The Arian Heresy: Encyclical Letter of Alexander of Alexandria and his Clergy, c. 319," from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 322-324.

³⁸ "The Arian Strategy according to Alexander of Alexandria, c.324," from "Letter of Alexander", in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 328.

To some degree, it seems for Alexander, that Arius is not even the most important threat anymore, as he labels Eusebius of Nicomedia as a threat to every bishop's authority and a danger to the church itself.

Soon after the letters, Eusebius of Nicomedia directly intervened in the conflict by hosting a synod in Bithynia. During the synod, Eusebius of Nicomedia reversed the findings of Alexander's Egyptian synod by welcoming Arius back to the church, declaring him to be orthodox, and demanding that Alexander submit.³⁹ Arius may have also returned to Alexandria and threatened the supporters of Alexander with violence.⁴⁰ The situation seems to have escalated further as the letters of Eusebius of Nicomedia and Alexander of Alexandria reached different bishops throughout the eastern part of the empire. Bishops denounced one another, and their dioceses either turned against one another or were divided within themselves.⁴¹ It seems that such a powerful partisanship had been created that it could threaten the integrity of the church itself. It seems this was when Constantine decided to intervene, as he sent Ossius of Cordoba, a bishop from Spain and advisor to Constantine, to mediate the problem by asking Alexander and Arius to compromise.⁴² Ossius of Cordoba's attempt to achieve a compromise between Alexander and Arius completely failed. While in the East, Ossius presided over a synod where they demoted a schematic named Colluthus.⁴³ According to historian Timothy Barnes, this synod also most likely made decisions about Arius and Melitius and decided to hold a major council at Ancyra to resolve these issues.⁴⁴ At the same time, great chaos had broken out in the city of Antioch due to the election of the

³⁹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205.

⁴⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205.

⁴¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 2.61. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 212.

⁴² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 212.

⁴³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

⁴⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

bishop of Antioch. A pro-Alexander bishop, Eustathius, was chosen and hosted a new synod of around fifty bishops from Palestine, Arabia, Phoenice, Syria Coele, Cilicia, and Cappadocia, and proclaimed Alexander to be orthodox and excommunicated three bishops⁴⁵ who disagreed, including Eusebius of Caesarea.⁴⁶ Ossius of Cordoba was also somewhat involved in this council, interrogating all three bishops who were exiled.⁴⁷ It is clear that Constantine's attempt to use Ossius of Cordoba to create a compromise between Alexander and Arius would have never worked. At the point of Constantine's intervention, the bishops were already forming factions to denounce one another, and synods were formed to override other synods. The church was completely divided. The issue had reached far beyond Arius and Alexander; and a compromise between them would have been powerless to resolve it. Further, this conflict was no longer about theology for Alexander. If Alexander made a compromise, it would have meant conceding power to Arius and Eusebius of Nicomedia. Alexander, as bishop of Alexandria, would have never conceded to a lower cleric under him and a bishop from another province. Constantine's choice of Ossius of Cordoba may have also doomed any chance of compromise. Christian clergy were chosen based on their devotion to God and knowledge of theology. Ossius of Cordoba was a prominent member of the clergy, it is possible that he already had certain theological stance on the substance of Jesus in comparison to the Father. As a clergy, Ossius of Cordoba may have wanted to resolve this theological dispute rather than a compromise that would have pleased no one.

⁴⁵ The other two bishops being Theodotus of Laodicea and Narcissus of Neronias. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

⁴⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

⁴⁷ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213.

Ossius' presence over two synods that ruled in favor of Alexander while he was on Constantine's mission certainly did not facilitate a compromise between Alexander and Arius or lower the tension between the two sides. Excommunicating bishops from one side of the conflict certainly did not help to form a compromise. It is questionable how effective Ossius' method was in creating a compromise in Egypt, or if he even wanted to create a compromise on theology. With Ossius of Cordoba's failure to secure a compromise between Arius and Alexander, the stage was set for a great church council to resolve the issues.

Deceptively Familiar Circumstances

The political circumstances that led up to both the Council of Arles and the Council of Nicaea share some remarkable similarities. Both councils took place after Constantine had just acquired a vast number of new territories. Before Constantine dealt with the Donatist Controversy, he had just united the western part of the Roman Empire, and before the Arian Controversy, Constantine had just united the eastern part of the Roman Empire with the western half. The timing of the two controversies meant that Constantine was not well-established in the region and was desperate for support within newly conquered territories. The locations where both controversies took place were on the edge of Constantine's territories. The provinces of Africa bordered Maximinus Daza's, and later on Licinius's land, and the provinces of Palestine and Egypt bordered the Persian Empire, both posed great threat to Constantine's reign. In both cases, the local Christians had demonstrated their capacity and willingness to use violence to solve their problems. This further increased the threat of civil unrest within these regions. Constantine could not afford to let unrest foment in these regions lest one of his rival Roman Emperors or the Persian Empire take the opportunity to end his reign or at least jeopardize his control of the empire. However, there

are also some differences within the circumstances. The territory that Constantine gained from Maxentius was much smaller than the territories Constantine gained by defeating Licinius. Larger territories meant the land was harder to control, and there were more people Constantine needed to appease. Further, there is no clear evidence to suggest that Maxentius had allies within the church of the West when Constantine defeated him, although since Maxentius tolerated Christians, it was certainly a possibility. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that Licinius had allies within the church, allies Constantine needed to deal with in order to secure his reign in the East. Further, when Constantine was ruling both halves of the empire, he needed to deal with threats from both ends of the empire. Therefore, any threat that occurred in the East after Constantine had united the empire would have been harder to deal with than threats that occurred when Constantine was only ruling the West.

The religious circumstances for the two controversies also seem similar on the surface. The persecution had a long-lasting impact on both the church of the East and of the West; those controversies involved arguments on theology, and the bishops of the church fought among each other over authority, power, and wealth. However, the persecution impacted the churches of Africa and Egypt in dramatically different ways, and members of the clergy took advantage of the persecution differently. The extent to which the bishops of the church struggled with each other for power also differed greatly. Finally, the threat posed to the legitimacy of the church created by these debates on theology also differed greatly. After the Great Persecution ended, the effect of the persecution in the provinces of Africa created a power vacuum within the local church structure, created the financial motivations of the people involved, and allowed them to use accusations of betrayal as a tool to remove rivals from power. The effect of the persecution was somewhat different within the provinces

of Aegyptus and the city of Alexandria. It seems that in the city of Alexandria, even before the persecution had ended, people were already taking advantage of the power vacuum it had created. Peter, bishop of Alexandria, fled the city when the persecution started, giving Melitius of Lycopolis the opportunity to assert control. Whereas the parties in Africa still wanted to somewhat follow church norms, using elections to fill vacancies created by the persecution, and accusations of betrayal when necessary, Melitius just openly took over Peter's role within the church because Peter had fled. Further, Melitius did not even wait for the persecution to end to assert power over his fellow Christians; this fact must have also offended many bishops who were still struggling against the imperial persecution. Due to these facts, Melitius' attempt to take over Peter's position can be interpreted as a much more aggressive attempt to grab power than that of the Numidians or the Carthaginians. The extent of internal arguments among the bishops was also much greater during the Arian Controversy when compared to the Donatist Controversy. In an overview, the Donatist Controversy can be seen as merely one group of people, with lack of support outside of Africa, challenging the authority of the entirety of the church. The Donatists can be ignored, as in fact this is what Constantine orders.⁴⁸ The Arian Controversy, on the other hand, not only divided people of the local churches against themselves, but also turned the dioceses of the East against one another, dividing the church in half, resulting in bishops refuting bishops and synods contradicting synods. Some historians also suggest that it is possible that the Arian Controversy divided the church between West and East.⁴⁹ It is impossible to ignore the Arian

⁴⁸ "Letter of Constantine I on Toleration of Donatists, 321 or 322," translated from *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 26.212-26.213, in Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 49.

⁴⁹ Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 144. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 2.64-2.72.

Controversy when everyone in the church was involved. In comparison to the Arian Controversy, the Donatist Controversy posed no real threat to the broader church. Furthermore, the Donatists' dispute never challenged core Christian beliefs. Although the Donatists, in their struggle for authority, threatened to remove many bishops and clerics from office and required re-baptism, they never posed a threat to fundamental church doctrines. The Arian controversy, on the other hand, challenged people's interpretation of Jesus' substance, a fundamental part of Christian doctrine. This interpretation seemed to be so important that Alexander of Alexandria suggested that people who did not agree with his interpretation of Jesus' substances were the same as Jews,⁵⁰ because Jews did not hold Jesus in the same reverence as Christians. Since this controversy was so fundamental, unlike the Donatist controversy, everyone had to choose a side; there was no middle ground. The Arian controversy allowed everyone to be declared heretical and challenged foundational church beliefs. Historian Harold Drake wrote that "the Donatist schism and Arian heresy were entirely different in nature and import: one concerned discipline and, perhaps, social division; the other went to the heart of Christian faith and belief."⁵¹ The Donatist Controversy only threatened the legitimacy of the clergy within the church; the Arian Controversy challenged people's faith and threatened the legitimacy of the religion itself.

The Council of Aspiration

When Ossius of Cordoba left Egypt, leaving many bishops excommunicated, he promised a great synod to be held later, most likely in Ancyra.⁵² It is unclear if the council at

⁵⁰ "The Arian Strategy according to Alexander of Alexandria, c.324," from "Letter of Alexander", in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 328.

⁵¹ Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance*, 250.

⁵² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 213-214.

Ancyra ever took place,⁵³ but Constantine did decide to summon the bishops of both the East and West to Nicaea for a council to resolve the Arian Controversy and other disputes among the Christians.⁵⁴ The moment of infighting and chaos had broken the illusion of unity of the Christian community that was created by the Great Persecution. The bishops would have done anything to gain the upper hand against their opponents. The bishops' desire to win seemed to trump everything else, even one of the reasons that caused their fight. Many bishops were angry at Eusebius of Nicomedia and Melitius of Lycopolis for what they saw as these two's overreaching into other bishops' dioceses.⁵⁵ However, when Ossius of Cordoba, Bishop of Cordoba, who had no ecclesiastical jurisdiction within the eastern part of the Roman Empire, presided over two synods in the East, the bishops did not challenge Ossius' lack of jurisdiction. On the contrary, they seemed to readily accept Ossius' authority, likely merely on the fact that he was Constantine's envoy. It seems that the bishops, so desperate for some outside power to intervene and condemn their enemy, agreed that imperial authority from Constantine's envoy outweighed the power of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. At this critical moment, Constantine summoning the council of Nicaea presented itself to be another opportunity for outside intervention for these bishops to defeat their enemies within the church. Many bishops seemingly gladly accepted Constantine's invitation to the council and, by accepting, essentially once again cemented Constantine's power over the church and

⁵³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214, "Letters of Constantine I on Convocation of The Nicene Council 324-325," translated from Syriac Miscellanies, 1-2, 5-6, in Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 122-124.

⁵⁴ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 338. "Letters of Constantine I on Convocation of The Nicene Council 324-325," translated from Syriac Miscellanies, 1-2, 5-6, in Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, 122.

⁵⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201. "The Arian Strategy according to Alexander of Alexandria, c.324," from "Letter of Alexander", in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 328.

placed the fate of their fellow clergymen in the hands of the imperial authority that had persecuted all of them not so long ago. This fact is further demonstrated when many bishops brought personal petitions to Constantine, complaining about their fellow clergymen; some may have even met with Constantine to complain in person.⁵⁶

The Council of Nicaea was held in 325, with Constantine being personally involved in the proceeding.⁵⁷ Constantine condemned the clergy for fighting among each other and burnt all the private complaints.⁵⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea suggest that there were more than 250 bishops from both the West and East, and countless lower ranking clergy who attended the council.⁵⁹ An adamant supporter of Arius, Eusebius of Caesarea, who had been condemned at the earlier council at Antioch, decided to switch sides right before the council and presented a new document proving his orthodoxy in line with Alexander and his supporters.⁶⁰ Constantine then proceeded to agree with Eusebius of Caesarea, proclaiming that he had the same belief and that Eusebius was orthodox.⁶¹ Then debate and discussion began on the correct answer to the question of Jesus' substance, and continued for many days. Finally, the council came up with the Nicene Creed, where it is stated that Jesus is "the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father; God of God, light of light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, consubstantial with the father..."⁶² and that anyone who claims that "there was a time when the Son was not, or that he was not before he was begotten, or that he was made of things not existing: or who say, that the Son

⁵⁶ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 215.

⁵⁷ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214-215.

⁵⁸ B Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 215.

⁵⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 3.8.

⁶⁰ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 216.

⁶¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 216.

⁶² "Nicaea Creed" from Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, tran. C.F. Cruse (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 1998), 418.

of God was of any other substance or essence, or created, or liable to change or conversion” will be condemned by the church.⁶³ With Constantine demanding that everyone at the council accept the new creed, the supporters of Arius requested the creed to be explained clearly and exactly.⁶⁴ After all the explanation and debate, everyone was asked to sign the creed. Only Arius and two Libyan bishops refused and were exiled.⁶⁵ It is important to note that before the Council of Nicaea, there was no correct definition of heresy or orthodoxy, the council “crystallized something that could be labelled “Arianism” more than it condemned an existing sect.”⁶⁶ The fact that the controversy over Arianism was based on theology meant that no clergy could ignore the controversy, and all had to choose a position for themselves. The complexity of the theological argument meant that every single term and phrase can be interpreted differently by different people. This ambiguity of the controversy meant that everyone needed to choose a theological position, with near infinite positions to choose from. There was no clear-cut right or wrong. This complexity and ambiguity were highlighted by the fact that at the start of the Council of Nicaea, not only was there no clear definition of Arianism, but there also was not even a clear definition of orthodoxy. The overwhelming number of positions and a lack of clear definition of orthodoxy allowed the bishops to weaponize theology as a way to attack any personal enemies they had within the church.

After settling the Arian Controversy, the council proceeded to other issues, such as the date for Easter, and dealing with other schismatics and heretics. The council allowed Melitius and the people he ordained to keep their rank but stripped Melitius of any real

⁶³ “Nicaea Creed” from Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, tran. C.F. Cruse (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 1998), 418.

⁶⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 216.

⁶⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 217.

⁶⁶ Commentary from: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 258.

authority within the church and declared all the clerics he already ordained would be inferior to people who were ordained by Alexander. The council also allowed Novatians back to the church as long as they accepted all the church's disciplinary standards.⁶⁷ By allowing clerics ordained by Melitius to keep their position and allowing Novatians back to the church, the bishops seemed to be attempting to unify the church on the surface level. However, the stripping of Melitius' authority within the church and the mandatory lower status of his supporters when compared to Alexander's supporters looks much more like the result of a political purge than an act of unity on behalf of the church. The bishops that "won" the Council of Nicaea were busily acting to protect their own authority rather than protecting the church. These more selfish desires can be seen by other canon laws the Council of Nicaea passed, including: new bishops should be chosen by all the bishops of the provinces, but if that is impossible, at least three need to be present, and those who are not must give their suffrages and consent in writing, then the metropolitan church needs to confirm it;⁶⁸ people that were excommunicated by bishops of one province cannot be let in by bishops of another;⁶⁹ Bishop of Alexandria shall have authority over Egypt, Libya, and Pentapolis, and all other metropolitan church in other provinces shall have the same authority over their

⁶⁷ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 218.

⁶⁸ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 338-339.

⁶⁹ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 339.

provinces.⁷⁰ Clergy exiled from their own church cannot be allowed into another.⁷¹ Clergy must respect the ranking order within the church.⁷²

One major issue that bishops had against Melitius and Eusebius of Nicomedia was their overreaching into other bishops' territories. As a reaction, the council passed new canon laws: bishops must be elected by all the bishops of the same province; people who were excommunicated by bishops of one province cannot be let in by another; and clerics who were exiled in one province cannot go to another. All these new canon laws aimed to condemn Melitius and Eusebius of Nicomedia's overstepping of their authority and prevent similar actions of bishops and synods contradicting and challenging each other to preserve the authority of bishops within their own regions. The mandatory confirmation by the metropolitan bishop in bishop elections, the confirmation of metropolitan bishops' authority over their province, and the specific emphasis on the case of the bishop of Alexandria all spoke to the real conflict, the authority of metropolitan bishops. At a time when there was a barely existing empire-wide church structure held together by imperial power, the bishops at the Council of Nicaea aimed to protect their authority at every level. The emphasis on clergy ranking protected the bishops within their own diocese, the emphasis on metropolitan authority protected the bishops within their own province, and the emphasis on no overreaching protected the bishops within the empire. These policies revealed the real

⁷⁰ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 340.

⁷¹ "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 342.

⁷² "Canons of Nicaea, 325," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 38-47, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 343.

struggle for power behind the theological one, the struggle for power within every single level of the church, from the local congregation to the entire empire. Finally, after the canon laws, Constantine exiled Eusebius of Nicomedia for supporting Arius,⁷³ and with everything done, Constantine dismissed the bishops and ended the Council of Nicaea. By supporting Constantine's decision to exile, the bishops agreed to the imperial enforcement of church policy. Eusebius of Nicomedia's, alongside Arius' and his supporters' exile, once again revealed that the true authority behind the Council of Nicaea was not the power of a church synod but imperial authority.

Distrust and Desire

The motivations for the Council of Nicaea differed greatly between the different bishops of the church and Constantine. Before the Council of Nicaea, the Christian community within many parts of the East was already deeply conflicted within itself. The conflict between Alexander, Melitius, Arius, and Eusebius of Nicomedia was a reflection of the struggle for power among the Christians. When Melitius went to Alexandria and ordained many clerics while Peter was absent,⁷⁴ what may be seen as an act of preserving Christianity during the Great Persecution can also be seen as an attempt to take more authority for himself. Peter and his supporters, on the other hand, by interpreting what could have been an act to preserve the faith during a time of persecution, chose to see it as an attempt to grab power. Melitius' action and Peter's reaction serve both as examples and proofs of the struggle for power between bishops of the same provinces. The conflict between Alexander and Arius

⁷³ "The Conduct and Exile of Eusebius of Nicomedia," from Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.20, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 351.

⁷⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 201.

can be seen as theological, but it can also be seen as Alexander's struggle against insubordination from a lower clergyman within his jurisdiction. It serves as proof that power struggles existed even within the local congregation. The many synods held and the many bishops excommunicated all over the East after the outbreak of the Arian Controversy exhibited that these power struggles existed far beyond merely just Egypt. What allowed the escalation of synods and excommunication to happen was the lack of an empire-wide church structure or rule. When there was no higher authority than the bishops, the bishops could contradict each other without ever coming to a resolution. During this deadlock, the bishops desperately wanted a way to win the struggle. When both Alexander and Arius started sending letters to other bishops asking for help, Eusebius of Nicomedia responded in favor of Arius and started lobbying on his behalf.⁷⁵ The web of letters and lobbying that Alexander and Eusebius of Nicomedia started can be seen as an early and vague form of an empire-wide church structure. It is this vague structure that put the conflict between Eusebius of Nicomedia and Alexander of Alexandria on a much larger scale and gave it greater consequences than the rest of these power struggles. In his letter, Alexander's attack on Eusebius of Nicomedia over his overreaching his authority by helping Arius seem much more harsh than Alexander's attack on Arius, who started the whole issue.⁷⁶ If the networks of communication and lobbying between bishops were to be seen as an early empire-wide church structure, then the leaders of the two opposing sides were not only arguing over theology but also fighting to see who had more authority and influence over the church. They were essentially fighting over the leadership of the church. This interpretation explains why

⁷⁵ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205.

⁷⁶ "The Arian Heresy: Encyclical Letter of Alexander of Alexandria and his Clergy, c. 319," from Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.6.4, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 322.

Alexander was more focused on Eusebius of Nicomedia than Arius, as defeating Eusebius of Nicomedia meant giving himself much more power over the entire church when defeating Arius would only barely solidify his control over Egypt.

But once again, without an overarching structure above the position of bishops, neither Alexander nor Eusebius of Nicomedia could win against each other, and this is when they saw imperial intervention as a means to an end. This was shown when the bishops who hated others who overstepped their authority so much seemingly accepted Constantine's envoy, Ossius of Cordoba, who had no ecclesiastical authority outside of his own diocese and was allowed to help preside over synods. If Ossius had no ecclesiastical authority, then his imperial authority as Constantine's envoy would be the only explanation as to why he was accepted. Accepting Ossius proved that the bishops clearly realized that they needed a higher authority than a bishop to resolve this controversy and defeat their enemies within the church, and when there was no such authority, they needed to borrow imperial authority to resolve what they could not. This willingness to borrow imperial authority can also be seen when the bishops readily accepted Constantine's invitation to attend the Council of Nicaea and gave him personal complaint letters to resolve. What made the Council of Nicaea differ from all the other smaller synods held around this time was not only the number of attendances, but also the fact that the Council of Nicaea had the authority of the emperor behind it, and imperial punishment to enforce its ruling. The motivation for the bishops had been more authority for themselves, and they soon realized they needed an empire-wide structure to do so. To have that empire-wide structure during a time of chaos, they needed to borrow imperial power.

Silence and Stabilize

Constantine had just conquered the eastern part of the Roman Empire, and the newly gained territories presented many challenges for him. Even though Licinius had been defeated, there was no doubt that there were still many supporters of Licinius within the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The killing of Licinius' supporters within the cities of the East⁷⁷ demonstrated how much threat Constantine saw in them. There was even the possibility that there were supporters of Licinius within the Catholic Church, with Constantine even claiming that Eusebius of Nicomedia was a supporter of Licinius during the civil war.⁷⁸ Constantine was therefore desperate to gain support among the newly conquered population.

The Christian community within the East could have provided Constantine with some much-needed political support. However, the chaos that the Arian Controversy had caused within the Christian community during this time resulted in them being useless to Constantine. Further, the unrest within the chaos within the Christian community of the East during this time also created additional threats to Constantine's reign in the East. The locations where the majority of Christian conflicts occurred bordered the Persian Empire, who had already posed significant threats to Constantine's predecessors and will pose a significant threat to Constantine later on.⁷⁹ Christians had already demonstrated their willingness to use violence and cause civil unrest,⁸⁰ and if such chaos were to break out near the borderland, there were huge possibilities that the Persian Empire would take advantage of

⁷⁷ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 210.

⁷⁸ "Letter of Constantine I on Exile of Eusebius, 325," translated from Gelasius, *ecclesiasticalHistory*, 3, in P. R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535.*, Vol 1 (London: S.P.C.K, 1966), 135-136.

⁷⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 4.56-4.57.

⁸⁰ Canons of Ancrya, c. 314-319," from E. J. Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola Conciliorum quae saeculo quarto habita sunt*, 28-35, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents illustrating the history of the Church to AD 337*, revised W.H.C Frend, 313. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 205.

the situation. Therefore, it was in Constantine's interest to stabilize the church, both to resolve the threat of civil unrest and Persian invasion, but also to gain supporters within the East. Constantine sending Ossius of Cordoba to find a compromise between Alexander and Arius, burning the personal complaints of the bishops, and his actions during the Council of Nicaea where he tried to find a compromise as best as he could⁸¹ all reflect this fact.

Right before the Council of Nicaea, Constantine executed Licinius, whom he had already promised to spare.⁸² This decision shows not only that Constantine still saw Licinius and his supporters as a grave threat to him but also that there were Christian supporters of Licinius. Historian Timothy Barnes argued that Constantine held the Council of Nicaea in order to distract from the fact that he broke his promise and killed Licinius.⁸³ If Licinius indeed had greatly persecuted Christians during his reign, the Christians would have celebrated Licinius' death and therefore did not need to be distracted. So, if the Christians indeed needed to be distracted, it would further prove that there were supporters of Licinius within the church, supporters that Constantine would have needed to eliminate. Eusebius of Nicomedia, who Constantine singled out as a supporter of Licinius, was exiled by Constantine after the Council of Nicaea. Eusebius of Nicomedia did not even start the Arian Controversy and did not seem to be the only fundamental reason for the disunity of the church. It is likely that Constantine exiled Eusebius of Nicomedia for political reasons. Constantine's motivation for the Council of Nicaea was to restore peace to the church so that the East could become more stable, and the church could quickly be rehabilitated to be used by him as a social organization. Constantine, I eliminated Licinius and his supporters

⁸¹ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 217.

⁸² Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214.

⁸³ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 214.

violently, but if he done so to the Christian supporters of Licinius, it may have been seen as persecution. The Council of Nicaea may have given Constantine the opportunity to eliminate his political enemy.

Conflicting Motivations

Alexander of Alexandria and Constantine may have coincidentally had the same enemy in Eusebius of Nicomedia, but the motivations of the bishops of the church and Constantine were not only different but also conflicting. The individual bishops of the church wanted more authority for themselves, and Constantine wanted to stabilize and improve his authority. In the process of trying to obtain more powers for themselves, the bishops realized the only way to defeat other bishops and gain power was to have an empire-wide church structure and imperial intervention was needed to create that structure during this period of unrest. The bishops wanted to borrow imperial power to eliminate their enemies within the church and improve their own authority. Constantine wanted to assert more control in the church and use the church as a tool for political power, and for that, he needed a unified church. The bishops wanted to use imperial power to boost their own power, while Constantine wanted to use church authority to boost his authority. The bishops wanted to use the Council of Nicaea to purge the church, while Constantine wanted a united church. For the bishops who had fought so hard for more individual authority and independence, permanent imperial influence within the church would have never been desired. The imperial backing of the Council of Nicaea was only a temporary means to an end for the bishops to gain power. For Constantine, who wanted to assert control within the church, a unified empire-wide church structure without him at the top would have been the last thing he wanted. With the canon laws of Nicaea granting stability and authority within the church, and the Council of

Nicaea exemplifying the empire-wide structure, the church might never again need to rely on imperial power as much as this time. Constantine, by temporarily gaining more control over the church with the Council of Nicaea, actually allowed the church to function without him.

Opportunities and Motivations

Constantine's interventions during the Arian Controversy and the Donatist Controversy shared some remarkable similarities, but there were also some critical differences between them. During the Donatist Controversy, Constantine did not intervene until he had received a petition from the Donatists. Even if the Christians respected Constantine's authority as the Pontifex Maximus, it is unclear how much they would have wanted the involvement of the imperial government who had just persecuted them, especially since the controversy at hand was so intimately related to that persecution. The Donatists' first appeal was what gave Constantine the justification to intervene in church issues. With each of the ensuing appeals by the Donatists, Constantine solidified his imperial authority over the church, concluding with his summoning of the Council at Arles and the official investigation in Africa. More importantly, with the intervention in Africa, Constantine created great precedents for his personal involvement in church affairs and his ability to summon large church councils. During the Arian Controversy, unlike the Donatist Controversy, it is very likely that Constantine intervened without ever receiving a petition from a bishop asking him to. Historians like Timothy Barnes argue that this was due to how Constantine felt it was his moral duty to intervene,⁸⁴ but if this was true, why didn't Constantine feel the same moral duty during the Donatist Controversy? Instead, Constantine waited for a petition asking him

⁸⁴ Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 212.

to. It is clear that Constantine's two involvements were so different because Constantine felt that he no longer needed to wait for a justification to intervene. With these precedents as justifications, it is likely that Constantine's motivations shifted more away from justifying his involvement and proving his authority in the church and towards actually using his authority. Constantine's new motivations to eliminate his political enemies within the church, to restore peace to the church so that the East could become more stable, and to allow the church to be quickly rehabilitated to be used by him as a social organization reflect this shift in motivations.

Aspiration and Necessity

Underneath the theological disputes, the Donatist Controversy and the Arian Controversy were about the struggles for wealth, authority, and influence between the various bishops and factions within the church. The bishops' aspiration for power was on full display. However, due to the inherent structure, or the lack thereof, of the church, these struggles and conflicts remained unresolvable. It was due to this stalemate that Constantine's involvement was accepted. However, Constantine's involvement had always been solicited or accepted out of necessity. When the Donatists appealed to Constantine, they did so out of sheer desperation. Constantine's decision was not wanted or respected. It was needed. The Donatists' continued appeals and ultimate rejection of Constantine's ruling against them reflect this fact. During the Arian Conflict, neither the Catholics nor the Arians petitioned for Constantine's involvement. Constantine's decision to involve himself, however, became one of the only ways for the two sides to achieve their goals of defeating the other. With this in mind, the bishops accepted Constantine's intervention. However, they quickly realized Constantine wanted different things from them when Constantine burned all the personal

complaint letters. Constantine's involvement was once again not wanted or liked, but it was needed. The Roman Empire had often demonstrated throughout their history their willingness to persecute against Christians, the previous Roman Emperors had often demonstrated their unreliability and randomness, and Constantine had often demonstrated his conflicting motivations from the bishops. The bishops, on the other hand, had demonstrated their thirst for power and wealth against each other. Why would a group of people battling for authority be willing to hand over authority to someone who had been proven to be unreliable, capable of persecution against them, and aspired to conflicting motives from them? During both conflicts, the church, with its lack of empire-wide structure, always needed to use Constantine to help solve its problems. After the Council of Nicaea, imperial involvement in church affairs was no longer a necessity but perhaps a nuisance.

Conclusion:

Key findings

The church structure during this period had an inherent lack of opportunity for advancement. The Great Persecution created opportunities for power and wealth within the local Christian communities, which in turn created desire. “Traditores”, real or imagined, added to the tension and mistrust that had long existed within some Christian communities. When the desire for power and pre-existing tension exploded into wide-spread contested elections, accusations of election fraud, accusations of overreaching of authority, accusations of evil plots and acts of violence, the church, lacking any central authority above the bishops, was unable to resolve them. The bishops, whose position granted significant religious prestige, were not so easily threatened by the mere secular accusation of a tainted election. This is when accusations of “traditores” and theological debates took on a new role in attacking bishops’ religious devotion, which many saw as the only way to remove them from power. However, due to the lack of any empire-wide authority to actually remove bishops from power, even this new method proved to be fruitless. The bishops held synods overriding and condemning each other. In this stalemate, the bishops realized that they needed a central

authority to resolve their problems. But at a time of extreme disunity within the church, it would have been impossible for the church to form such an authority itself.

The central authority the bishops found was Constantine. Constantine had been through a complex civil war, betrayed and was betrayed by many. His own authority and security will always be at the top of Constantine's motivations. Gaining supporters would be essential in gaining stability within his newly conquered lands. The church would have been a useful ally or tool in this effort, but in its present divided and volatile form, the church not only did not help Constantine in gaining supporters but also helped increase the possibility of rebellion and invasion through civil unrest on the edge of the empire. Constantine needed both an excuse to insert himself into the church and swiftly stabilize the church.

The bishops of the church, willing to do anything to increase their own authority by defeating others, accepted his intervention. Soon, however, the bishops realized that Constantine, who placed imperial authority above church authority, actually threatened their own authority. Further, Constantine's desire for a unified church fundamentally conflicted with some of the bishops' original reasoning behind supporting Constantine's interference. The bishops' desire for Constantine was ultimately temporary, while Constantine wanted a permanent influence. Constantine, in an attempt to assert his influence in the church by exemplifying what an empire-wide church structure could look like and threatening the bishops' authorities, ultimately drove the church further away from him.

Historical Significance and Contributions

Historians have often debated Constantine's religious devotion and contribution to the expansion of Christianity. In almost all of their arguments, they have focused solely on

Constantine as the deciding factor in everything. In favor of Great Man theory of History, historians argued over the use of a single word on the intention of Constantine on one end and ignored countless events and actions of the clergy on the other. My thesis explores Constantine as an ordinary emperor, without the influence of later Roman History, taking into consideration how his past experience in the civil wars and simple political goals had shaped his motivations. The Donatist and Arian Controversy were Christian controversies, and the Council at Arles and the Council of Nicaea were Christian councils. The motivations, influences, and beliefs of the Christian leaders, and the structure of the church cannot be ignored. My thesis focuses on not treating the church as a monolithic organization that is completely lacking in any self-determination. Instead, it focuses on the agency of the individual prominent members of the church. Just as the civil war had influenced Constantine, the Great Persecution played a great role in the thinking of the bishops and the circumstances of the church during the reign of Constantine. My thesis explores the relationship between the bishops and Constantine after a persecution launched by the imperial government and how this relationship would influence the bishops' opinions on Constantine's insertion of imperial power above the church. Historians have also often taken for granted the reasoning behind the church's formation of an empire-wide structure later on. My thesis explores the actual difficulties the members of the clergy faced due to the lack of this structure. Constantine, as the first Christian Roman Emperor, did increase the power of the church, not by supporting them as a Christian, but by driving them away with his attempt to assert control.

Unanswered Questions

It is important to note that in my thesis, although I focus on the power struggle of the bishops, and the usage of theology and punishment for “traditores” as a means to an end, it should not be seen as suggesting that there was no genuine religious belief among the leadership of the church. The church can be a social movement and a religious institution at the same time. There can be power politics among people of religious faith, especially during a time when there were no clear separation of church and state. The use of theology as a weapon can co-exist with genuine belief in theology, just as Constantine’s political motivations and religious devotion can exist at the same time. At a time when there was no clear divide between church and state, it would be a mistake to inject a modern understanding of the topic into the analysis.

Due to time constraints, I was unable to compare the policies of Constantine with those of the other third century emperors to determine if Constantine was actually unique. If Constantine’s policies after conquering new territory matched with those of other emperors, it would further prove that many of his actions had political intentions alongside religious ones. Due to a lack of language fluency, I was unable to access some primary sources, had to rely on the translation of primary sources, which could often change interpretation significantly. Perhaps a more thorough exploration of all available primary sources could offer a deeper level of understanding of inter-church conflicts of this period.

Looking Ahead

When exploring history through policy, it is essential not to just focus on the motivations behind these policies, but also the circumstances that inspired these policies. Each policy can speak to a problem within a society. Each argument can reflect a group of people’s logic. Historians, by only focusing on Constantine and his sheer will, ignored the

conditions of the common people, the condition of the church, the reasonings of the bishops. Sheer will cannot drive history. It is the facts, conditions, desires, and beliefs of the people that do so. By treating all famous historical figure as ordinary without the use of hindsight, clearly considering their circumstances, and the agencies of other actors, Constantine's later religious policies, later church councils and emperors, and the relationship between Constantine's descendants and the church could all be interpreted in a different light.

The lack of opportunities and the desire for wealth and power are still relevant today, and it will always be relevant. At the same time, the separation of church and state is still a relevant topic today as well. In today's world, it is a much more one-sided topic, only focusing on if the state should integrate the church. Just like historians who ignored the opinion of the church when studying the reign of Constantine, people today once again seem to choose to ignore the church once again. Looking back at a time when there was no separation of church and state, the desire for power by the people within the church actually pushed for the church to be more independence from the state. The relationship of the church and the state back during the reign of Constantine was defined by men's desire for power and control, and it is likely the relationship today is defined by the desire for power as well. It is not to say that genuine religious belief cannot exist. But the church and state are organizations made up of different people with different desires. It would always be a mistake to ignore the agency and desire of these individuals.

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