

# The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

## **Put Not Your Trust In Princes**

“Do not put your trust in princes, Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help.”

Psalm 146:3

The church did not face constant persecution in its first 400 years. The earliest persecutions were localised and some of the Roman Emperors were tolerant of Christianity. The first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, for example, was a time of peace and growth for the church — it was then that the first buildings set aside especially for worship appeared.

It was not until 250 that the Emperor Decius organised the first Empire-wide persecution of the church.

## **More Persecution**

In 247 Christians had refused to join in the pagan festivities celebrating the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Rome. The following year a series of invasions by the Goths shook the Empire and once again people blamed Christians for making the gods angry.

Decius executed many of the leading bishops and ordered that every citizen must sacrifice to the gods. Anyone who could not produce an official certificate to prove that he had was imprisoned and tortured. The persecution only ended with the death of his successor, Valerian, in 260. It had lasted for 10 years but in the years that followed it went on doing damage. Many had committed apostasy to save their lives and lasting splits developed over how those of them who wanted to return to the church should be handled.

For the rest of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century the church was left alone. The Empire had other things to think about for the invasions from the north were continuing. In 303 the Emperor Diocletian was persuaded to take action against the Christians once again. He ordered what was to be the last and most terrible persecution by the Roman Empire. Then a remarkable thing happened.

When Diocletian died in 305 there was a struggle for power that was only resolved in 312 when Constantine won the famous battle of Milvian Bridge.

## **Constantine**

Constantine was a sun worshipper but on the night before the battle — so the story goes — he had a dream in which he saw the first two letters of the name of Christ forming the shape of a cross and heard the words “By this sign you will conquer.” The following day he had the sign — the Chi-Rho sign — painted on the shields of his troops. He prayed to the God of the Christians and won an amazing victory which made him supreme ruler of the Western Roman Empire (The Empire had been divided in the time of Diocletian). People argue about whether or not Constantine actually became a Christian but what is clear is that from that point on he became the champion and protector of the church.

As Emperor, although he tolerated paganism, Constantine promoted Christianity as the one true faith. He persuaded Licinius; his counterpart in the Eastern Empire, to follow a policy of freedom for all religions and when Licinius later reneged, Constantine defeated him in battle and took control of the whole Empire, West and East.

He introduced a state welfare system. He made Sunday into an official day of rest. He constructed church buildings at his own expense. He brought Christian advisors into his court. Christians were given preference in appointments to public office. He made Christian bishops part of the Empire’s legal structure by allowing them to judge in disputes over civil law. He granted bishops and presbyters freedom from all contributions to the state and paid their

salaries from state funds. He forbade crucifixion as a punishment and tried, unsuccessfully, to bring an end to the gladiatorial games.

In spite of all he did paganism remained the religion of the majority of the citizens of the Roman Empire during his reign but what Constantine did do was to change for ever the relationship between the state and the church.

## **Mixed Blessing**

In the Roman world religion and state had always been closely bound to one another. The Emperors had taken it for granted that it was their duty to promote and maintain the worship of the Roman gods. Constantine however, owing his position to God, used that position to further the interests of the church and took upon himself the role of its protector.

Under Constantine's successors — with the exception of one all professed to be Christians — the influence of Christianity within the Empire became even stronger and before the end of the century it was the official religion of the Empire.

Persecution, at least as far as the Roman Empire was concerned, was ended and the influence of the church extended, as did the Empire itself, from Britain to Arabia, for everywhere the armies of Rome marched the name of Christ was proclaimed. But it was not all good for the church.

Many began to join the church because it had become fashionable. Some sought office in the church because of the financial advantages and prestige it brought. Nominal Christianity had arrived.

Successive Emperors, seeing themselves as protectors of the church interfered in its affairs. Constantine himself had used his power to try to settle doctrinal controversies.

In response to the heretical teaching of Arius Constantine summoned a council of bishops — the Council of Nicea — at which he presided. Under his guidance the Nicene Creed was drafted as a statement of orthodox belief. When Arius refused to sign the Creed he was banished. It was the first time a state had punished someone for heresy and it was the beginning of something that eventually led to persecution by Christian states of those who did not conform to the teaching of the Catholic Church.

At first the church was happy to accept the patronage of the Emperor but in time Emperors came to consider themselves as rulers of the church, appointing bishops and trying to control the church's theology and worship.

There were those who foresaw the danger, even in the early stages. The most notable was Ambrose, bishop of Milan from 374 to 397, who famously forced Emperor Theodosius I to submit to the discipline of the church. Nevertheless, the uneasy relationship between church and the state continued, and still continues in many places to this day.

## **Church And State**

In Romans 13:1 – 7 the apostle Paul gives some clear guidance on the relationship between the church and the state as it should be.

## **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. What is the responsibility of every believer toward the government of his day?
2. What is the responsibility of government toward the church?
3. Should the government have any say in the affairs of the church?
4. To what extent should the church accept help from the state?
5. Should the church play any part in the government of the state?

## **For Further Study**

Daniel lived in a country that was hostile to the people of God yet he played a very active role in its government. Read through the book of Daniel. What is there in it that can help you answer the questions we have been thinking about?