

How did the change in the legal status of the Church in the early fourth century (i.e. Constantine's conversion and its impact) affect the development of the Church life, practice, worship and thought in the post-Nicene era? Be inclusive.

The change of the legal status of the church during the 4th century had a great impact on every aspect of the Christian church. When Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the state religion, it was a 180° turn around for Christians. Christians went from being persecuted and martyred for their faith to now being received and respected by the state.

One great impact this had was in causing a flood of worldly and nominal Christians to now become members of the church. Earlier persecutions had weeded nominal Christians out of the church; now there was nothing to distinguish who was sincere and who were members out of convenience.

This in part gave rise to two reactions. One was the monastic movement which was mainly men that were fleeing the church to care for their own spirituality. They pulled away from the worldliness in the church.

It also gave rise to some separatist movements such as the Novatians (in Rome) and Donatists (in North Africa). They were reacting to how those that had 'lapsed' during times of persecution were now let back in the church. They were also reacting against other lax moral practices in the church.

Another big affect this change of legal status had on the church in the area of its practice was that there grew an outward structure of church government that was often closely tied to the government of the state, with its emperors, church and government affairs got closely connected to one another. All of the major ecumenical councils of the first few centuries after this combining were called by the emperor and he often presided over them. This surely had an effect also in the development of Christian thought and doctrine since often a council's decision was greatly influenced by the theological or personal disposition of the emperor. Bishops were 'anathemed' and 'exiled', not only from the church but from the empire. This is clearly seen in debates and councils that took place in the 4th century regarding Arianism and the doctrine of the Trinity.

One of the reasons major doctrines like this (the Trinity and Person of Christ) were not well defined in the first 2 or 3 centuries of the existence of the church was because the church was more in a 'survival mode' because of persecutions. It did not have time nor ability to develop its thought and doctrine, since Christian writings were often destroyed and meetings were held in secret. Some doctrines had basic foundations due to defenses ('Apologias') being written, but if wasn't until after this change in legal status that these doctrines could mature and be formalized.

This new status also had an impact on the worship of the church. On the one hand, since the Emperor was the legal head of all religions, he was by default the ruler of the Christian religion also (but not exclusively). In order to keep all his subjects happy, some of who still had pagan practices, he combined pagan practices with Christian practices. This is easily seen by tracing the development of the Christmas celebration of the birth of Christ. Chances are that Christ was not born in December at all, but there were a number of pagan holidays practiced around this winter solstice. To keep both pagans and Christians happy, this one day near the pagan holidays was set aside to celebrate Christmas.

Also there could now be elaborate places of worship built. This probably helped to make the place of worship more important than the heart of the worshiper. It helped give rise to ornate places of worship.

Whereas once the leaders of the churches had to give up their belongings by plundering, often the church leaders became wealthy and had luxurious lives. To be a bishop in a large metropolitan area became a very prestigious thing and there are even stories in the centuries following this change where there were struggles over who the next bishop would be.