

Did the Catholic Church paganize or apostacize centuries ago, perhaps at the time of Constantine?

By Graham Osborne

If Jesus founded a church two millennia ago, and that Church is still in existence, if you're not part of it, you would need some pretty strong justification for why not. With this in mind, and in order to undermine the Catholic Church and its teachings, some contend that the Church Jesus originally founded on earth, the Catholic Church, paganized, and then completely apostacized – fell away from the truths Jesus left it – shortly after He established it.

For example, returning to two of my previous columns, the existence of Mormonism hinges on their belief that the Church Jesus founded fell away. If this did not happen, then their founder, Joseph Smith's "mission" is misguided and the establishing of his "church" absolutely unnecessary. Mormon theologian, James E. Talmadge, spells this out plainly in his infamous book, *The Great Apostasy: "If the alleged apostasy of the primitive Church was not a reality, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the divine institution its name proclaims"*.

These are serious charges, because they have the potential to lead people away from, or out of, Jesus' true Church, and they are often accompanied by misrepresented Scripture quotes and falsified history. And while dates around this supposed apostasy vacillate wildly from group to group, many suggest the Christian conversion of the pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine, in the 300's as a likely starting point for this collapse.

To answer these charges, let's first turn to Scripture to see if such an apostasy is anywhere to be seen, and then finish by examining the reign of Constantine himself.

Recall that Jesus didn't first inspire the Bible to be written (though of course he wanted it written!), he first founded his Church. When God builds his Church, the "body of Christ" – with Jesus as "the head of the body, the Church", and "in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17-18) – could anybody truly believe that this Church could then just implode a few centuries later? Scripture absolutely opposes such a view.

In Matthew 7:24-25, the **wise builder** builds his house on rock and it does not fall, no matter the storms. Similarly, in Matthew 16:16-19, Jesus, the wisest of builders, builds his house – his Church (St. Paul calls the Church "the house of God" in 1 Timothy 3:15, Douay-Rheims) – on Peter ("Petros", which means "rock" in Greek), saying: "you are Peter; and upon this *rock* I will build my

church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". Jesus then gives Peter a share in His own incredible authority: "the keys to the kingdom of heaven", and the power to bind and loose on earth what is bound and loosed in Heaven! How could this Church possibly fall with a promise like that?

Similarly, in Mark 3:27, Jesus clearly states that, "No one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then, he can plunder his house" (see Matt. 12:29). Jesus is the "strong man" guarding his Church, "the house of God", from attack and plunder. Jesus' house will never fall!

Jesus then promises his disciples that He will be with them "always, until the end of the age" [Matthew 28:20], and that, "the Father... will give you another Advocate to be with you *always*, the Spirit of truth... He will guide you into all the truth" (John 14:14-17, 16:13). Similarly, St Paul makes the powerful statement that the church is "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

How could "the pillar and foundation of truth", "the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles ... Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20-21), *ever* fall away? It just couldn't happen! And it would be a direct contradiction to Jesus' teachings and promises: "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David (i.e. this is both an earthly *and* a heavenly throne)... and of his kingdom there will be *no end*" (Luke 1:33).

Even the Old Testament clearly rejects such a belief. Isaiah 9:6-7 promises: "to us a child is born ... Of the increase of his government ... there will be no end." Similarly, Daniel 7:13-14 declares: "there came one like a son of man ... his dominion is an everlasting dominion ... and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church adds insight for us here, reaffirming that the kingdom of God is present on earth as the Church – in seed form, but growing like a mustard tree: "The kingdom of heaven was inaugurated on earth by Christ... The Church is the seed and beginning of this kingdom" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 567, 763). And similarly, Section 763 states that, "The Lord Jesus inaugurated his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Reign of God... Christ ushered in the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church "is the Reign of Christ already present in mystery."

So with all this overwhelming Scriptural evidence to the contrary, where do some anti-Catholic groups get this notion of the Catholic Church apostacizing early in its history?

To try to prove their point of a total apostasy, some quote verses like 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4: “the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness ... takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.” Incredibly, some try to apply this verse to both the Pope and the Catholic Church itself, claiming that this rebellion is actually a turning away from God incited by false Catholic teaching.

But when read in context, it quickly becomes evident that this verse has nothing to do with a total apostasy in the midst of history, but a *partial rebellion* that will occur “at the coming of ... Jesus” – *at the end of time* – at which point Jesus will actually “destroy” this man of lawlessness (the antichrist) (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1,3,8).

And to drive the point home that he is talking about Jesus’ final coming, and not some point in the midst of history, St Paul again warns them: “Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day [Jesus’ return] *will not come*, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed” (2 Thessalonians 2:3).

Matthew 24:4-12 invariably gets quoted as well: “they will deliver you up to tribulation ... And then *many* will fall away, and betray one another ... And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray ... *most* men’s love will grow cold. But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

But again, this verse is being used totally out of context. Jesus is prophesying about the tribulation that will proceed and surround the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD. And again, he is saying *MANY* will be led astray: “*most* men’s love will grow cold”. But *NOT* everyone: “he who endures to the end will be saved.” So again, this is absolutely not talking about a total apostasy of the Church Jesus founded, but, in fact, the *survival* of his Church in the midst of intense persecution.

Amos 9:8-10 is also quoted often: “Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground”. But this verse is talking about an apostasy in Old Testament Israel, and definitely not the New Testament Church. Additionally, the apostasy and destruction will clearly not be total either, as Amos adds: “except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob’, says the Lord.”

But perhaps the favorite “apostasy verse” is Acts 20:29-31: “he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church ... he said to them ... fierce wolves will come in among *you*, not sparing the flock; and *from among your own selves* will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

But read in context, it is obvious that St. Paul is referring to “wolves” attacking and “not sparing” the Church/flock specifically at Ephesus here, and certainly *not* the universal Church.

Similarly, Mat 7:15 is also regularly appealed to: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits... Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

But again, when Jesus speaks of trees not bearing good fruit and being thrown into the fire, he is absolutely not talking about the Church here. He is speaking of individuals – “you will know *THEM* by their fruits”. He is warning people about “wolves” – false prophets, and how to spot them “by their fruits” – and what will ultimately happen to them.

Another well-worn verse is 2 Tim 4:3-5 “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.”

But ironically, this verse is better directed back at Protestantism in general. The nature of Protestantism is extremely subjective. People read Scripture and decide what it means *to them*, individually. There is no church to guide their interpretations – no higher authority than themselves. They claim the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for this process, but their countless personal interpretations often run contradictory to each other, clearly showing this claim does not add up. Time and again, people make the Bible and the “church” into their own image – and this done to the tune of thousands of different and conflicting denominations. All of this comes as a cost of personal interpretation of Scripture severed from the moorings of the authoritative Church Jesus built and left to guide us.

So while there are several places where we see individuals falling away from the true faith, and often trying to lead others away also, or where we see the Church enduring significant persecution, there is not a single verse in all of Scripture that even remotely suggests a future collapse and total disappearance of the Church Jesus founded in Matthew 16.

And there is absolutely no doubt that this Church Jesus founded *is* the Catholic Church. This is just a simple fact of history – with the name, “Catholic”, being applied to this Church as early as the first century AD! And built upon rock, Jesus, the “wisest of builders” [cf. Matthew 7], has promised that His Church will never fall – “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it – specifically because Jesus has built His Church on solid, unshakeable rock [cf. Matthew 16:16-19].

But some still insist that the Catholic Church did, in fact, apostacize, regardless of Jesus' promises and the "rock" solid Scriptural testimony to the contrary.

In an attempt to offer a plausible scenario for this theory, and apparently unaware of the actual historical situation of the first 300 years of Christianity, some literally invent a story of the Church falling away when the pagan Emperor Constantine came into power in the 300's. They contend that Constantine paganized the Church during his reign, some even insisting on the even wilder claim that he invented the Catholic Church itself!

Anyone who'd risk such an outrageously, historically inaccurate proposition as this has virtually no grasp of the well-documented history of this period. Let's delve into the real history of this claim.

The Emperor Constantine, after receiving a vision from Heaven that led to a potentially miraculous military victory that secured the Roman Empire for him, did in fact eventually convert to Catholicism. This much is true.

But from here, the fabricated story takes off, claiming that Constantine then proceeded to make Catholicism the official religion of the Roman Empire, and in doing so, somehow paganized the Church in the process. Some speculate that by making conditions more favorable for Christianity in the Roman Empire, many may have entered the Church half-heartedly, seeking to gain social, political or economic advantage, and that this situation then further contributed to pagan influences entering into the Church, eventually eclipsing the true Christian faith.

Additionally, some insist that Constantine himself also introduced pagan elements into Christianity, including such key doctrines as Transubstantiation, Papal authority, the Communion of the Saints and more – all doctrines that can be seen clearly in the writings of the Early Church Fathers and Bishops centuries before Constantine! And those on the more extreme end of the scale further allege that he actually *started* the Catholic Church itself, placing himself at its head!

Some also appeal to the notorious "*Donation of Constantine*" as further proof that the Papacy was a pagan construct implemented by Constantine. While space doesn't permit a full refutation of this fraudulent decree and associated anti-Catholic claims, there is irrefutable historical evidence that this was a forged document dating from the eighth or ninth century, with no connection to Constantine whatsoever! No reputable historian would even reference it to Constantine today, but it had much impact in medieval Europe before it was indisputably proven to be a forgery.

These wildly inaccurate claims are saddening, and they should shame any legitimate Christian genuinely interested in the truth. The true history of the situation is quite different.

For starters, Constantine *did not* make Catholicism the official religion of the Roman Empire. In signing the Edict of Milan with Emperor Licinius in 313, often referred to as the Edict of Toleration, he simply made it permissible to be a Christian, officially ending centuries of Christian persecution – which was extremely intense under the previous Emperor, Diocletian – and restoring confiscated Christian property as well. Christianity would not become the official state religion of Rome until the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 AD – long after Constantine's death.

Long before Constantine, the Catholic Church – the only Christian Church in that period of history incidentally – had already been solidly in existence for almost three centuries – since the time of Jesus and the Apostles. And If you look at the pre-Constantine writings of the early Church, they clearly testify to the very same doctrines the Catholic Church teaches today: the Eucharist, Baptism, Apostolic Succession, the Papacy, Marian doctrines, and much more – all Catholic! This puts to shame false charges by some that these Catholic Christian doctrines were Constantinian inventions. The sad part is that many fall for these false historical misrepresentations.

But undaunted by this incontrovertible history, some still try to claim that Constantine presided over and directed the Council of Nicaea in 325 – the first ecumenical/universal council of the Christian Church since the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 – again speculating that he introduced various pagan elements into Christianity specifically through this council. Some even allege that he determined the canon or list of books of the Bible at this council as well, keeping those books he liked, while tossing others.

Now these are certainly some interesting claims! While there is no doubt that Constantine was concerned about the religious disagreements going on in the Roman empire, and did play an important role in convoking the council (it is uncertain whether Constantine initially consulted with Pope Sylvester I over the calling of the council, but the aging Pope unable to travel, sent his representatives who became the first signatories on the final council document), Constantine did not participate in the discussions of the council or even have a vote!

And while Nicaea may have discussed a lot of things, the canon of Scripture was not one of them. Constantine had absolutely nothing to do with determining which books were truly inspired and part of Scripture. This

determination was finalized with the help of the Holy Spirit decades later through several Popes and Church Councils in the late 300's and early 400's.

Another noteworthy point is that Constantine himself initially had fairly strong leanings towards Arianism, a devastating and growing heresy of the time that denied the divinity of Jesus, claiming He was created by the Father, and so was neither eternal nor of the same nature as the Father.

It was precisely the Council of Nicaea that not only *condemned* this heresy, but gave us the foundations for the Nicene Creed – arguably the greatest formulation of Christian faith in the history of Christianity. If Constantine was really guiding the council – which he absolutely was not – why did this pivotal council not adopt his Arian views?

And if Constantine was such a pagan influence on the Christian Church as some insist, how did this council give us some of the most foundational doctrinal pronouncements about Jesus and the Trinity in the history of Christianity? Pronouncements that virtually every Christian – Catholic and Protestant – still holds today?

In the end, the theory of Constantinian paganization of the Catholic Church is simply a sad misrepresentation of history at best, and a flat out lie at worst. While Constantine may not have been a perfect Christian – for example, there is suggestion that he withheld his own baptism until on his deathbed to ensure forgiveness of all the sins of his whole life, an illicit but occasional practice of his day – he made changes in how Christians were treated that helped lead to the evangelization of the whole world.

What Christian today would not have cheered Constantine's decision to permit Christians to practice their faith unpersecuted, and to allow the teaching of Christianity to proceed freely throughout the world? Would this not be the desire of every Christian: to convert the greatest pagan empire in the world to Christianity?