History and Christianity: Constantine's contribution to Christianity and Adventist interpretation of the role played by Constantine

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"I have experienced this in others and in myself, for I walked not in the way of righteousness…but the Almighty God, who sits in the court of heaven, granted what I did not deserve – Constantine."[1]

The purpose of this paper is to look into the life of Constantine who was a politician and also known as the first Christian emperor. The scope isn't only limited to Constantine the politician and Christian, but also on how Adventist interpret the contributions which he did for the benefit of Christianity then to modern Christianity as we know it today.

Historians have debated at length whether "the first Christian emperor" was a Christian at all. Galli and Olsen present to us that some people thought him to be an unprincipled power seeker and further argue that his religion was at best a blend of paganism and Christianity for purely political purposes. I will not dispute the fact that Constantine was a politician and a pagan before his conversion which we will be addressed later on. Being a politician by no means disqualifies one from being a Christian and moreover being used by God for His purpose. History has proved that one can be a politician and be a tool in the hands of the Creator God for the benefit of His Church.

We may want to consider people like Nebuchadnezzar, whom God through Jeremiah the prophet declared [9] behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the Lord, and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make

[1] Galli, M., & Olsen, T. (2000). Introduction. In *131 Christians everyone should know* (pp. 307). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations.[2] Notice that the LORD calls Nebuchadnezzar His servant and this is during a time that the Babylonian monarch was still devoted to the worship of the gods of Babylon, yet the Creator calls him His servant. He is not the only heathen then that God used and made reference to as His own. Isaiah the prophet prophesied about a heathen leader whom God was to use for His purpose. Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will lose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: and I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the Lord, which call *thee* by thy name, *am* the God of Israel. For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me.[3] God makes it clear that although Cyrus is His anointed one, He has called him by his name and surnamed him yet Cyrus hasn't known the Lord. God did that for the sake of Jacob and Israel His elect which at the time of the fulfillment of this prophecy Israel was in Babylonian captivity. The Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ (anointed) means anointed one, king or also can refer to a messiah. Anointed one is a person that had been chosen and anointed for a specific purpose or office, a reference to someone set apart by God for special service as prophet or king. The term later became a messianic title and is the literal meaning of the words "Messiah" and "Christ."[4]

In the case of Cyrus we learn that God doesn't need to wait for you to first be converted to Christianity before He can use you. One can still be anointed to do the biding of the Lord even when one may not have knowledge of who God is. It is for this reason that I dismiss the argument that Constantine the time he acted in good favour of Christians may or may have not been a true convert of Christianity; that is not of significance however his contribution for the cause is. Certainly Constantine held to ideals we no longer share. He knew nothing of religion without politics or politic without religion, yet he clearly believed he was a Christian and he looked back the Milvian Bridge battle just outside the walls of Rome as the decisive hour in his newly found faith.

Historians may differ in that Constantine saw a vision or a dream or literally saw in the sky a bright cross with the words "by this sign conquer". It is not

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[2] *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Je 25:9). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

[3] *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Is 45). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

[4] Mangum, D. (2014). In *The Lexham Glossary of Theology*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

important to me if it was a vision, a dream or something that he saw when he was awake. What is important is the fact that the sign of the cross and the message he saw. It is said that Christ Himself told Constantine to take the cross into battle as his standard. This proved to be an encounter that would lead Constantine to conversion, which came gradually. After conquering by the sign of the cross, Constantine knew that his victory was to be credited to the God of the Christians and so this brought him closer to Him who hanged on the cross for the sin of the world. Constantine then had a discussion with Licinius who was a faithful pagan and persecuted the saints.

In 313 the famous Edict of Milan was drawn by him who in the truest sense Licinius was not for the idea. This Edict given by Constantine gave Christians freedom of worship and directed the governors to restore all the property that was seized during the severe Diocletian persecution. Eusebius in his Church History recorded the Christian jubilation: "the whole human race was freed from the oppression of the tyrants, we especially, who had fixed our hopes upon the Christ of God, had gladness unspeakable." Constantine's faith to some at this point was still imprecise but few questioned its authenticity. To say what he did was a political strategy to win the favour of the Christians may be hard to wrestle with, thus we need to give him the benefit of the doubt. Even if he did that because of political reasons, what was he to gain if not the confidence of his subjects not to have freedom of worship? I perceive that if this be the case, he understood that if he gave Christians freedom to worship God, when they pray for the emperor to prosper, they too would prosper. It is no hidden fact that as Christians we ought to pray for the political leaders that God has allowed being our leaders in the context of civil governance. When we pray for them and our country prospers we also shall prosper.

In AD 314 after the Edict of Milan, Constantine sent a message to the assembled bishops at the Council of Arles. He wrote about how God does not allow people "to wander in the shadow" but reveals to them salvation: "I have experienced this in others and in myself, for I walked not in the way of righteousness, but the Almighty God in Heaven, granted *to me* what I did not deserve."[5] At first we see that Constantine had no desire to impose his newfound faith as a state religion, as he wavered and for a decade he didn't celebrate his Milvian Bridge victory with pagan sacrifices and there were still no Christian symbols. As it was the custom of the Romans, they celebrated and honoured the Sun-god ascribing that victory to him. Through the years,

[5] Galli, M., & Olsen, T. (2000). Introduction. In *131 Christians everyone should know* (pp. 307). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Constantine's Christian convictions grow. He had ample time to engage with the bishops of the territories in the Western part of the Roman Empire. It is critical here for us to understand that though Constantine was for the cause of the Christians even as he showed signs of conversion himself to the Christian religion, he was not a theologian. When it came to theological issues he was dependent on the influence of the bishops. Being a ruler, he used his influence to be involved in every issue of the Church because to him the success of the Christian religion in Rome would be the success of the Roman Empire.

It is important that I reiterate that when Constantine gave Christians the freedom of worship in AD 313 which we enjoy today; his cause was to fight the Christian cause. He might have not been theologically sound; it was the duty of the bishops and the councillors in his inner circle to lead him in the right direction theologically. It is rather unfortunate then that the propaganda of the Church (Catholic) then was to use the power of the state through Constantine who was now a Christian to legalize Christianity and then set aside the day of the Sun as a day of rest and religious activity.

In the kingdom and the vast territory of the Roman empire, devout Jews who observed the seventh-day Biblical Sabbath being after the setting of the 6th day of the week to the setting of 7th day of the week (which according to the Roman Christian calendar it is Friday sunset to Saturday sunset). As a result through the influence of the Roman bishops, he legalized the venerable day of the Sun-god to be a day of rest in AD 321. From a political point of view, he did what he was advised to be in the best interest of the Church, guided by the religious leaders and from a religious perception Constantine did what he did through the knowledge of Scripture he had. I can say that if he was influenced by the Sabbath keepers and they presented their case, he would have legalized Sabbath to be a religious day of rest. Remember that what he did theologically, he had a cloud of theological guidance.

Though he made Sun-day a day of rest which the Roman bishops attributed as the day of the Lord in honour of the resurrection of Christ, Constantine did not persecute the Christians he gave freedom of worship in AD 313. Their persecution unfortunately came after Constantine and the Edict of Milan issued by Constantine was used as a point of reference to do harm to the saints, though it was evidently not the aim of Constantine to oppress God's people but to liberate them. In AD 323 Constantine triumphed over Licinius and became the sole ruler of the Roman world. The victory as Galli and Olisen puts it enabled Constantine to move the seat of government permanently to the East, to the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (now modern day Istanbul in

Turkey). He enlarged and enriched the city at enormous expense and built magnificent churches throughout the East. The new capital was dedicated as New Rome but everyone soon called the city Constantinople. If Constantine was such a bad chap after Christians, why would he then build churches for the Christians to worship in suitable structures? He was a philanthropist too. Many Christians benefitted from the cause of Constantine to share his resources with the needy people under his care. Christians were more populous and vocal in the East than they had ever been in Rome, so during the last 14 years of his reign, "Bullneck" could openly proclaim himself a Christian. He proceeded to create the conditions we call "state-church" and bequeathed the ideal to Christians for over a thousand years.

When Constantine took the territories that were under Licinius in the East, he found that the church was divided and he wanted to unite the church. He felt obligated that he should make sure that the division in the kingdom shouldn't by anyway be interference to the peace of the populace. In 325 the Arian controversy threatened to split the newly united empire. To settle the matter, Constantine called together a council of the bishops at Nicaea, a city near the capital. He ran the meeting himself. This however doesn't mean that he was influential in the theological discussions but as emperor he wanted to be in the midst of the theologians and bishops to see to it that the cause of the division in the churches of the empire should be settled. You are bishops Constantine told them, whose jurisdiction is within the Church but I also am a bishop, ordained and appointed by God[6] to oversee those outside the Church. This makes it easy to understand that even though he was still trying to understand the Christian religion and its theology, everything that he did was for the advantage of those in and outside the Church. As one skilled in public relations, Constantine brought this skill to the management of Church affairs. He had sent out letters in all provinces warning his subjects against superstitious error, and encouraging them in the pursuit of true godliness.[7]

The Arian controversy began at the Church of Alexandria in Egypt. This was the centre of where scholars around Africa and the Western world would come and study because of the rich literature this library and university in Egypt had. Alexandria became the centre of Christian philosophy because of its university. Its 20th bishop Athanasius had an important role in Constantine's Nicaean Council in 325.[8] Constantine wrote a letter to the Church hoping that

[6] ὑπὸ θεοῦ καθεσταμένος

[7] Demoniacal." *1709* renders "diabolical."

[8] 3Abdel-Rahman Shereif. "The Emergence of Christianity in Egypt," dailynewsegypt.com/2013/06/19/theemergence-of-christianity-in-egypt/33.

it would suffice for unity.[9] He selected from the Christians in his train one whom he well knew to be approved for the sobriety and genuineness of his faith, and who had before this time distinguished himself by the boldness of his religious profession, and sent him to negotiate peace between the dissentient parties at Alexandria.[10] In the letter the following is what made the content of it: I was anxious to check this disorder, and could discover no other remedy equal to the occasion, except in sending some of yourselves to aid in restoring mutual harmony among the disputants, after I had removed that common enemy (Licinius, whose prohibition of synods is referred to in Bk. 1, ch. 51. The disputes here mentioned are those between the Catholic Christians and the Donatists, a very violent sect which sprung up in Africa after the persecution by Diocletian.—*Bag.*) of mankind who had interposed his lawless sentence for the prohibition of your holy synods.[11] Eusebius continues to let us know that Constantine allowed some of the bishops the use of the public means of conveyance, while he afforded to others an ample supply of horses for their transport. The men of God that attended the council to discuss the Arian controversy exceeded two hundred and fifty (The number present is given variously as three hundred (Socrates), three hundred and eighteen (Athanasius, &c.), two hundred and seventy (Theodoret), or even two thousand (cf. Hefele). It was conjectured that the variation came from the omission of names of the Arians (cf. note of Heinichen, Vol. 3, P. 506–507), or that it varied during the two months and more), while that of the presbyters and deacons in their train, and the crowd of acolytes and other attendants were altogether beyond computation.[12] Again one may ask why Constantine was concerned with the division in the Church. Schaff declared: Constantine believed that *the* system of policy which assumes all subjects to be Christians, connects civil and religious rights, and regards Church and state as the two arms of one and the same divine government on Earth.[13]

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[9] Richardson, E. C. (1890). The Life of Constantine: Prolegomena. In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine* (Vol. 1, p. 442). New York: Christian Literature Company.

[10] Eusebius of Caesaria. (1890). The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine. In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), E. C. Richardson (Trans.), *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine* (Vol. 1, p. 515). New York: Christian Literature Company.

[11] Eusebius of Caesaria. (1890). The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine. In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), E. C. Richardson (Trans.), *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine* (Vol. 1, p. 516). New York: Christian Literature Company.

[12] Eusebius of Caesaria. (1890). The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine. In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), E. C. Richardson (Trans.), *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine* (Vol. 1, p. 522). New York: Christian Literature Company.

[13] Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). *History of the Christian church* (Vol. 3, p. 12). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

The Arian controversy, which Constantine through the council of Nicaea came from the bosom of the Catholic Church. The roots of the Arian controversy are to be found partly in the contradictory elements of the Christology of the great Origen, which reflect the crude condition of the Christian mind in the third century; partly in the antagonism between the Alexandrian and the Antiochian theology. Origen, on the one hand, attributed to Christ eternity and other divine attributes which logically lead to the orthodox doctrine of the identity of substance; so that he was vindicated even by Athanasius, the two Cappadocian Gregories, and Basil. On the other hand, in his zeal for the personal distinctions in the Godhead, he taught with equal clearness a separateness of essence between the Father and the Son and the subordination of the Son[14], as a second or secondary God beneath the Father (hence he termed the Logos δεύτερος Θεός, or Θεός without the article, comp. John 1:1, in distinction from the Father, who is absolute God, ὁ Θεός, or αὐτόθεος, Deus per se. He calls the Father also the root ῥίζα and fountain πηγή of the whole Godhead. Comp. vol. i. § 78. Redepenning: Origenes, ii. 304 sq., and Thomasius: Origenes, p. 118 sq.), and thus furnished a starting point for the Arian heresy.[15] In general Arianism was much more akin to the spirit of the Antiochian school than to that of the Alexandrian. Arius himself traced his doctrine to Lucian of Antioch, who advocated the heretical views of Paul of Samosata on the Trinity, and was for a time excommunicated, but afterwards rose to great consideration, and died a martyr under Maximinus.[16] The contest between these two views broke out about the year 318 or 320. Arius and his followers, for their denial of the true deity of Christ, were deposed and excommunicated by a council of a hundred Egyptian and Libyan bishops at Alexandria in AD 320/1. The spread of Arianism spread because Arius was a prominent and popular figure in the Alexandrian Church. He believed that the Logos is a creature called into being by God out of nonexistence. As a creature the Logos was subjected to change. He further believed that there was a time when in which the Son/Logos didn't exist. The council found that Arius had misinterpreted Scripture but he made it clear that he will not stop to teach his heresy. It is then that Constantine called the Nicaea council in May AD 325. The council rejected Arians. The confession creed was revisited and anathemas were included regarding Arians.

Considering the above, it's clear that Constantine contributed to the Godhead doctrine which the SDA Church embraces as a fundamental doctrine.

[14] Ἑτερότης τῆς οὐσίας, or τοῦ ὑποκειμένου. De Orat. c. 15.[14]

[15] Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). *History of the Christian church* (Vol. 3, pp. 619–620). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

[16] Schaff, P., & Schaff, D. S. (1910). *History of the Christian church* (Vol. 3, p. 620). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

The Church shouldn't ignore the contribution of Constantine when it has benefitted from his works. Chances are that had Constantine not been the one used by God to lead to the Godhead doctrine, without a doubt God would have used someone else. We shouldn't be prejudiced and only magnify the Sun-day worship legislation which Constantine did not to the ill of the Christians but for them. As I reiterate, had he known the theological truth of the Sabbath and his councillors been observers of the Sabbath, today we would have been talking about Constantine legalizing the Biblical Sabbath.

The contribution of Constantine by far goes beyond the Trinity doctrine. The Arianism heresy is significant to the prophetic interpretation which the Seventh-day Adventist Church holds in Daniel 7:23-24 which states: "Thus he said, the fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces, and the ten horns out of this kingdom *are* ten kings *that* shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings."[17] These three kings that shall be subdued are the three nations that embraced the theology of Arianism. With time this heresy which was accepted by three nations would totally be subdued and the following is how it happened. In AD 31 Ulfilas was ordained to be a bishop of the Goths and he was an Arian. He espoused the views of the Homoean party. This man worked for seven years among his people until persecution forced him and his fellow Christians to seek refuge on Roman soil. The Visigoths converted to Arianism when their king, Fritigern in AD 376 led his entire nation into the Church after they had themselves taken refuge from Hunys on Roman territory. The Goths who defeated Valens at Andrianople in AD 37 in a battle growing out of a dispute with the Roman authorities were a people who had accepted Valen's own faith which was Arian Christianity. It was not just the Visigoths but their neighbours as well the Ostrogoth's. The Vandals in part and the Burgundians who had embraced Christianity in its Arian form before invading the empire. The Burgundians later abandoned Arianism in AD 517 and they became part of the Franks. The Visigoths who settled in North Africa attacked the Vandals. It was at Roman be host that the Visigoths attacked the Vandals in Spain. A quarrel between Boniface, count of Africa and Aetius, count of Italy permitted the Vandal conquest of North Africa. The emperor Justinian's conquest ended the Arian kingdoms of the Vandals and Ostrogoth's. In Spain the Visigoth king Reccared renounced Arianism in AD 587, an act which was confirmed at the third council of Toledo in AD 589. In

[17] *The Holy Bible: King James Version*. (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Da 7:23–24). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

about AD 590 the gradual conversion of the Lombard's to Catholic Christianity was begun, though not completed until about AD 660. In this was Arianism finally disappeared or was subdued and uprooted.

In AD 321 Constantine issued a decree that allowed Churches to receive legacies, thus giving them the legal status of corporations. Prior to that when the Church's properties were confiscated, she was not given the legal right of owning an entity or property. We might not know what would have been the case if Constantine had not given the Church that civil and legal right. That however is pertinent because whoever would have done so would have been celebrated in Christianity for doing it. Denominations today own properties and entities because of this law that Constantine decreed. The Church could also receive property from its laypeople by law when they would have included it in their will. The SDA Church a few years ago taught through the stewardship department that members are advised to include in their will an offering to the Church, something that was championed by Constantine. The Southern African Union (SAU) of the Adventist Church has a corporation (SEDCOM) that insures and owns properties of the Church and it might not be the SDA Church only. It shouldn't be the case that the Church fails to acknowledge some of the things that were pioneered by Constantine. Perhaps this may be an oversight on the part of the Church; however I'm not convinced because the Church amplifies the law that Constantine wrote to make legal the day of the sun, Sunday first day of the week as a weekly holiday from work. If in the archives of the Church we can remember the name Constantine as the reason for legalizing Sunday the first day of the week as a day of worship instead of Sabbath the seventh day of the week, then the Church must also acknowledge the good work that was championed by Emperor Constantine.

History may argue otherwise but I am of the opinion that Constantine though he was a politician, he realised the importance of civil authority and religious authority as given by God. After his knowledge of the only true God, he did all he did for Christians. Although his conversion is difficult to pinpoint, in the fullness of time his actions showed that he had aligned himself with the little knowledge of God he had then. His works for the cause of Christianity should be celebrated as he went against popular belief when he cast his lot with Christians. Emperor Constantine's contribution for Christianity and some ultimately which we benefit from today as Christians and as a Church should not go into oblivion.

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4. Demoniacal." *1709* renders "diabolical."

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