

IV. The
Imperial
Age 325-476

IV. THE EARLY CHURCH: IMPERIAL AGE

Prefatory comment

This period of church history marks the growth of the Christian community during the formative years of legal status. No longer outside the law and subject to vicious persecutions, the church now operates as a social arm of the Roman society.

It had been demonstrated in the third century that it was practically impossible for one man to rule the whole empire. The esprit-de-corps had been lost and the avarice of individual leaders had become the curse of the economic-political arena of achievement. The failure of Roman leadership following Alexander Severus had given the empire 50 years of poor government with continuous seditions, plots, defections, etc. Diocletian had succeeded in reuniting the Empire but knowing that it was beyond the control of one leader, he had diversified the authority with an east/west, north/south division and thereby put the government into something of a coalition of leadership. The ideal lacked reality although it worked so long as it had the respect of the people and the cooperation of the appointees to the places of power.

But following Diocletian's resignation, a brief period of chaos occurred until Constantine and Licinius established a joint rule. This ended with Constantine's mastery in 324 and the empire returned to a single ruler under him. What then had been true in the former years returned. The Empire had too much space, too high a slave component, too little congruity among its members and too little real central authority to control the barbarians on its borders. It was obvious that the empire was in for a bad time unless some drastic reform came and it was probably too far down the road for that.

Some historians have blamed the church for the empire's collapse. While we do not think this is fully true, there are elements of truth in it but the collapse was fated long before the church obtained legal status. Perhaps the real cause of the death of the empire was just what might be called "old age." Maybe. At any rate this is a fascinating period and it is worthy of notice to see how the church used its new freedom and what effect governmental protection had on the life of the Christian community.