

## The Apostles and Christian Nationalism

As with all matters of Christian truth, the relationship of the Christian and church to the government requires connection to the apostles, who were central in the composition of our New Testament, the authoritative repository of their “memoirs” (as Justin Martyr called them). Any claim that Christ’s followers should demand a Christian government must make its case from Scripture, and the New Testament in particular.

This lesson will survey in VERY broad strokes the development of “Christendom” over the centuries and thereby lay the groundwork for evaluation of Christian Nationalism from God’s Word.

### I. The Empire Embraces “Christianity.”

#### A. The Conversion of Constantine

*The Emperor Constantine is one of the major figures of Christian history. After his conversion Christianity moved swiftly from the seclusion of the catacombs to the prestige of the palaces. The movement started the fourth century as a persecuted minority; it ended the century as the established religion of the empire. Thus, the Christian Church was joined to the power of the state and assumed a moral responsibility for the whole society. To serve the state, it refined its doctrine and developed its structure. (Bruce Shelley, Church History in Plain Language, Word, 1982, p. 104)*

#### A. The Imperial Church

##### 1. Changes in Worship.

The early church had a very simple form of worship. The earliest descriptions are those of Justin Martyr and the Didache.

*The service, which was held on “the day of the sun,” started with the reading of the “memoirs of the apostles” or the “writings of the prophets” for a period “as long as time permits.” An exhortation or homily based on the reading was then given by the “president.” The congregation then stood for prayer. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper followed the kiss of peace. The elements of bread and “water and wine” were dedicated by thanksgiving and prayers to which the people responded by an “Amen.” The deacons then distributed them to the homes of those unable to attend. They finally took up a collection ... Then the meeting was dismissed, and all the people made their way to their homes. (Cairns p.83).*

##### 2. The Church becomes “Roman.”

*As the emperor become the number one lay person in the church, a simple ceremony no longer sufficed. The pomp and circumstance of the imperial court was adapted to honor the Emperor of emperors. Processionals, lights, special dress, and numerous other elements added to the grand setting. (Christian History Magazine, Vol. XII No. 1: Worshipping Like Pagans?, pp. 19-20)*

*By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had achieved a dominant position in the empire, and Christians felt they could borrow cultural language and ideas more freely than before (Ibid., p 20).*

## II. Imperial Church Government.

### A. State involvement in Church matters.

*Constantine ruled Christian bishops as he did his civil servants and demanded unconditional obedience to official pronouncements, even when they interfered with purely church matters. (Ibid., p. 110)*

An example of State involvement in Church affairs is seen in the Council of Nicea (a.d. 325). The purpose of the council was to address the issue of the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity. Some very vocal and influential heretics were teaching that the Son was a created being (Arius' view). The council denounced Arianism as heresy, but it represented another important development: **The council was called by the emperor, Constantine.** Thus, a precedent was set that continued for centuries.

### B. Church involvement in State matters.

*Historical events during this era (313-590) conspired to enhance the reputation of the bishop of Rome. Rome had been the traditional center of authority for the Roman world for half a millennium and was the largest city in the West. After Constantine moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople in 330, the center of political gravity shifted from Rome to that city. **This left the Roman bishop as the single strongest individual in Rome for great periods of time, and the people of that area came to look to him for temporal as well as spiritual leadership whenever a crisis faced them.** He was a tower of strength during the sacking of Rome in 410 by Alaric and his Visigoth followers, and his clever diplomacy had at least been able to save the city from the torch. The emperor at Constantinople was remote from Rome and its problems, but the bishop was near at hand to exercise effective authority in **meeting political as well as spiritual crises.** When the imperial throne in the West fell into the hands of the barbarians in 476 ... **the people of Italy came to look to the Roman bishop for political as well as spiritual leadership.** (Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, Zondervan, 1981, pp. 157-158)*

The conversion of the Roman Empire to "Christendom" at the end of the fourth century had great consequences for the Church, some good, some bad.

*[Constantine] allowed Christian ministers to enjoy the same exemption from taxes as the pagan priests; he abolished executions by crucifixion; he called a halt to the battles of gladiators as a punishment for crimes; and in 321 he made Sunday a public holiday. Thanks to his generosity, magnificent church buildings arose as evidence of his support of Christianity ... [But] there were also the masses who now streamed into the officially favored church. Prior to Constantine's conversion, the church consisted of convinced believers. Now many came who were politically ambitious, religiously disinterested, and still half-rooted in paganism. This threatened to*

*produce not only shallowness and permeation by pagan superstitions, but also the secularization and misuse of religion for political purposes (Church History in Plain Language, pp. 108-110)*

### III. Loss of Antithesis

#### A. The sacred and the secular

##### 1. The myth of neutrality

- a. God is contra mundum (cf. John 17:9; Romans 12:2; James 1:26; James 4:4; 1 John 2:14-15)
- b. Common grace and total depravity

##### 2. The church and the world in history.

- a. The NT Church – antithesis (see passages above)
- b. The Early Church – equivocation

*...the most pertinent fact of the Constantinian shift was not that the church was no longer persecuted but that the two visible realities of church and world were fused. There was, in a sense no longer anything to call “world” – state, economy, art, rhetoric, superstition, and war were all baptized ... the distinction between church and world was blurred, and to a large degree eliminated ... (Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, p. 25).*

*[Nevertheless] it was still necessary to distinguish true believers from nominal or false believers. St. Augustine, for example, thought that true Christians might make up as little as 5 percent of the visible church/world. So he and other theologians constructed and refined the doctrine of the true but now invisible church ... Before Constantine “Christians had known as a fact of experience that the Church existed but had to believe against appearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ ruled over the world but had to believe against the evidence that there existed a believing church. (Ibid., pp. 25-26)*

- c. The Middle Ages – sacralization.

Medieval Roman Catholicism ... divided work into categories of sacred and secular. This attitude was reflected by Eusebius in the fourth century:

*Two ways of life were given by the law of Christ to His Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living ... Wholly and permanently separate from the common customary life of mankind, it devotes itself to the service of God alone ... Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other, more humble, more human, permits men to ... have minds for farming, for trade, and other more secular interests ... and a kind secondary grade of piety is attributed to them. (Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time*, p. 74).*

- d. The Reformation – equilibrium.

*Luther was the person who more than anyone else challenged the notion that clergymen, monks, and nuns were engaged in holier work than the housewife or shopkeeper. He wrote, "It looks like a small thing when a maid cooks and cleans and does other housework. But because God's command is there, even such a small work must be praised as a service of God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns." (Ibid., p. 104).*

*William Tyndale said that if we look externally "there is a difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching of the Word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all." According to Perkins, "The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep ... is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching." (Ibid., p. 104)*

e. The Present – secularization.

*When fundamentalism emerged as a movement in the United States, it did so as a persecuted minority group. The fundamentalists rejected and were rejected by the increasingly liberal and inclusive denominations in which they had been nurtured. They [tried to] nourish their children and future ministers free from the corruption of the world, its values and practices ... Thus, the fundamentalists believed in the Christ against culture. (Richard Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals*, p. 12).*

The neo-evangelicals broke with fundamentalism in the early 40's, because the world was passing them by, and they were no longer convinced that the world was that bad after all – at least, not as bad as the fundamentalists had maintained ... the evangelicals knew that to influence the world for Christ they would have to gain its attention in a positive way. In a word, they would have to become respectable by the world's standards. (Ibid., p. 13).