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Romes Truce with the Church



Church History - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses Rome's relationship with the Church during different periods in history, beginning with the persecution of Christians under Valerian and ending with Constantine's role in establishing Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Gregg highlights the intrusive nature of Constantine's involvement in church affairs, arguing that the emperor's legacy ultimately resulted in the infiltration of non-Christians into the Church. He emphasizes the importance of a changed heart and total surrender to Jesus as the foundation for true Christianity, instead of relying on legislative action or government support.

Transcript

Tonight we're going to talk about Rome's truce with the Church. There was a war, you know, between Christianity and Rome for almost three centuries, certainly two full centuries. In the early days of the apostles, most of the persecution of the Church came from the Jews, not from Rome.

At least in the earliest times, the first apostle to die was James, killed by a Roman leader, but that was at the instigation of the Jews and to please the Jews. The first actual Christian martyr was Stephen, who was stoned by the Sanhedrin. And most of the people who tried to kill Paul were not Romans, but Jews who traveled around and bothered him a great deal.

But after a certain point, especially after Nero had made the Christians the scapegoat for the burning of Rome and accused them falsely of being the ones who started the fire and persecuted them as a result of it, there became a precedent followed by at least ten additional emperors over the period of the next 240 years or 250 years of persecuting Christians as sort of an imperial hobby. The emperors enjoyed at times being extremely cruel to Christians. It is not the case that the second and third centuries were entirely made up of persecutions, but it is the case that there were ten persecutions of varying intensity by ten different emperors, the last three of which were Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian.

Now, Decius was, at least up until his time, the most severe persecutor of the Church. And fortunately, his persecution, though severe, was rather short. It only lasted for two years.

But he was followed by Valerian, who continued to persecute the Church for another, oh, seven or eight years. And after that, there was a long period, about 40 years or so, 43 years, where the Church enjoyed some unusual freedom from persecution. But the persecutions were not over.

A generation of Christians were born and grew up during a time without persecution during that 43 years. But then came Diocletian. Now, Diocletian was the last of the emperors to officially launch a persecution against the Christians.

And he only did this very near the end of his 20-year reign. He was the son of a peasant or of a slave. It's not clear.

And he rose up through the Roman army to a position of authority. He may have had no education at all, was possibly illiterate, at least in the time he was growing up. He may have gained education after becoming emperor.

But during a time when Rome was very much in civil crisis and there were many persons killing previous emperors and trying to take that position and wear the purple themselves, he was proclaimed emperor by his soldiers. And he conquered all rivals and became the emperor of Rome. But he was different than other emperors.

Most of the emperors simply were military-type leaders, in a sense, political military. But he changed the empire into more of an oriental-style monarchy where he wanted to be worshipped. Diocletian required people to call him Lord and Master and to bow down prostrate before him when they approached him.

This caused some problems for Christians, of course, at certain points, because they would not call anyone Lord except Jesus. And that may have been one of the reasons that persecution eventually broke out against them. But Diocletian is normally remembered, except for the end of his reign when he began to persecute the Christians, he's remembered as a very effective, surprisingly innovative ruler.

And he made a number of reforms militarily and economically and politically that were quite striking. One of the reforms he made was that he divided Rome into two major districts, the Eastern and the Western. Now, eventually, about a century later, there actually were two empires.

There was an Eastern Roman Empire and a Western Roman Empire, but that's not what Diocletian started. He divided Rome into various districts or smaller portions because he thought the empire was too large to be ruled by one man, which is a pretty modest thing for a guy to say when many emperors before him had attempted to rule the empire all

by themselves. And for a man to be a world dictator is an ambition that many men have had, but he actually wanted to share the rule with other people.

So he set up an innovative way of ruling Rome, dividing it into an Eastern division and a Western division. He set up an Augustus over each side, an Augustus in the West and an Augustus in the East. He himself took up residence in the East and was the Augustus, which would be the primary ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire.

And in the West, he set up a man named Maximian to be the Augustus in the West. And each Augustus had an assistant or a subordinate ruler called a Caesar. Now realize the word Caesar had been used for centuries before in another manner, but in the time of Diocletian, a Caesar was sort of like a vice president to the Augustus.

The Augustus was the principal ruler, the Caesar below him. And the reason he did this, apparently, is that Diocletian was concerned about the instability, especially that occurred in the empire when there was a turnover of emperors. Whenever there was an emperor getting old or unpopular, someone would rise up to assassinate him and try to take his place.

Well, it may have been just out of self-protection that he didn't want, in his old age, to be assassinated. I don't know what really motivated him. But he set up the system that he thought would prevent such things from happening.

There would not be one ruler, just not. And really, the Augustus would have a pre-set date that he would abdicate the purple. And he would then turn over the Augustus role to his Caesar, his subordinate.

And then that subordinate, that Caesar, would become the new Augustus and would appoint another Caesar below him. So there's this succession that would take place, ideally generation by generation, and there would be no need for violence. It would be much more difficult for any one man to take over the whole empire because there's two separate districts with their own successions going independently.

It is believed that it was at the instigation of Galerius, who was the first Caesar under Diocletian. When Diocletian was the Augustus of the Eastern Empire, Galerius was his subordinate, his Caesar. Galerius was very hostile toward Christians.

Interestingly enough, Diocletian's wife and daughter were Christians. And Galerius married Diocletian's daughter, who was a Christian, but he was very hostile toward Christians. And even when Diocletian stepped down on the prescribed date, he actually retired into civilian life, and he required his counterpart in the West, Maximian, to do the same.

And so these next two men came to power. Diocletian pretty much gave up persecuting Christians at the end of his reign, but Galerius was inclined to continue the persecution

somewhat. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Diocletian, when he began to persecute the church, it was 303 A.D., and the persecution took the form of executions. He first of all arrested and executed bishops, the leaders of the churches in various cities. He also destroyed church property or confiscated it.

And he also ordered the destruction of all the sacred books of all the churches. They would actually require the bishops, before they were arrested, to surrender the sacred books. And some bishops wouldn't do it.

And others, in order to protect the congregation, because the threat was if they didn't surrender the sacred books, all the congregation would be killed, some of the bishops, in order to save the lives of the congregation, did surrender the books. There was later a controversy over whether these men who surrendered the books would be admitted back again into the church when the persecution ended, because some ministers, I guess, let their whole flock be slaughtered rather than turn over the scriptures. To tell you the truth, that seems a little bit unnecessary.

I mean, not that the church would do well without scriptures, but after all, I imagine a lot of the scriptures were fairly memorized anyway, and to have all the congregation killed so that you don't have your Bible taken away is, I guess, more symbolic than practical. But this kind of persecution was going on for a while. And for a change, the martyrs' heroism began to have an impact on the citizens of Rome, who were mostly pagan.

And although a century or so earlier, Tertullian had said that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, implying that when martyrs die, persons are converted by their testimony. This was not true in the time of Tertullian quite as much as it was later in the time of Diocletian. It must have been true in some sense in Tertullian's day, or else he wouldn't have said it.

But it was really true in the last persecution under Diocletian. Many, many people were converted by seeing the heroism of the martyrs. And in fact, there were people who were not Christians and did not convert, but they sympathized with the martyrs.

They complained and criticized the government's policies of persecution. They wanted to stop the bloodshed. They didn't have any animosity toward the Christians.

And there were even some non-Christian citizens who hid and protected Christians from the persecution, so that the government's policy for the first time became extremely unpopular. And not surprisingly, it was the last time it really was carried out. The most brutal persecution was taking place in the eastern part of the empire.

And that was where Galerius ruled after Diocletian. Over in the western empire, remember there were two rulers, the Augustus and the Caesar. The Augustus was Maximian, and he also persecuted the Christians in the west.

But his Caesar, who ruled over Britain and Gaul and Spain, Gaul being, of course, France, Constantius was the Caesar in the west, and he refused to execute people on religious grounds. He just had a conscience about it. He just felt like people shouldn't be killed for having a religious conviction.

Constantius, not coincidentally, was the father later on of Constantine. And Constantine, of course, is the man who's going to dominate most of our consideration tonight. But Constantius was generous toward Christians, and he had had a wife named Helena.

Actually, not a wife, but a concubine named Helena. And she was the mother of Constantine. Constantine was actually an illegitimate son of the Caesar Constantius when he was Caesar.

And when Diocletian elevated Constantius to that role, he required Constantius to put away Helena, his concubine, who was the mother of Constantine, and to marry Theodora, who was the stepdaughter of Maximian. There's a lot of, rather, inbreeding of the royal families at this time. In fact, I got some real interesting information off the internet today.

If any of this stuff interests you, I don't know whether I'll have the capability to make it sound interesting, but it is interesting. On the internet, they have something called the Online Encyclopedia of Roman Emperors, or something like that, and it's got all kinds of details I didn't think would be available. It was amazing.

As I was looking up each of these emperors today and cross-referencing them, how many of them were just married to each other's sisters. I mean, the two major rivals that Constantine eventually had to kill in order to gain the empire were his brothers-in-law, because he was married to their sisters-in-law. And, I mean, there was a lot of intermarriage going on there.

And so Constantius was made by the emperor to divorce his concubine, who was a legal concubine, so it was a divorce, and to put away Constantine, as it were. I don't know, maybe Constantine stayed in the family. I never got any information about that.

But Constantine remained very devoted to his real mother. He never apparently bonded with his stepmother, Theodora. And when his mother was divorced by his father, Constantine's mother became a Christian.

And so Constantine may have, for that reason, because he loved his mother, and even after he became a professed Christian, she was very influential in his reign. It may have been that fact that led him eventually to embrace Christianity himself, although he did not immediately. When he grew up, he joined the army under his father, and he embraced the religion of Helios, the sun god.

That's one of many Roman religions available. And there's a sense in which he almost

never renounced that religion, even when he professed to become a Christian, as we shall see a little later. But he was a worshipper of Helios.

And here's how things progressed to cause Constantine to come to power. His father, Constantius, died, and his soldiers, who were very loyal to him, proclaimed Constantine the new emperor, or the new Augustus, really. Now, Constantine was not really in line, in the line of succession, to become the new Augustus.

When Maximian, the former Augustus in the West, had died, Constantius had become the Augustus, but he only lived a year after that and died. And therefore, Severus, who had become his Caesar, should have become the new Augustus if the succession that Diocletian had set up had been followed. But Constantine was more popular with the soldiers than Severus, and so they proclaimed him the new emperor, the new Augustus.

And the Augustus in the East by this time was Galerius, because Diocletian had stepped down in 305. And Galerius felt like he was too far away geographically, really, to interfere with this proclamation of Constantine as the emperor in the West. And so Galerius did not intrude or get involved with that.

And his Caesar, I don't want to get these terms wrong, Augustus and Caesar and so forth, in the East, Galerius' Caesar was a man named Maximinus. I don't know if it's Maximinus, or probably it's Maximianus. That's how I'll pronounce it, I guess.

And he had a son named Maxentius. And when he saw that Constantine had been proclaimed emperor, pardon? It was Maximian's son, right? Whose son did I say Maxentius was? Okay, sorry about that. You're right.

Those two names are too similar. Maximinus and Maximian. And since I don't speak Latin, I'm not even sure where the accent goes on those syllables.

Pardon me. You're right. The son of Maximian, who had been the Augustus before Constantine's father, felt like he had more of a right to be the ruler in the West than Constantine had.

And we got that straightened out. And so Maxentius, the son of Maximian, killed Severus, who was the only reasonable rival there to Constantine and himself in that role. And he went and entrenched himself in Rome, and the people of Rome, in the city of Rome, declared Maxentius the emperor of the West.

Well, Constantine was in the West, but he was not in Rome. He was in Gaul with the troops. And so he marched against Rome to conquer it from Maxentius, who was proclaiming himself to be the successor of his father.

Now, Galerius was in the East, and he declared, not Maxentius, but Licinius, another man, to succeed Severus, who was killed. Now, if you have the chart I've given you,

some of these names appear. I realize these names are unfamiliar to almost all of us.

At least, almost all of the names are. And therefore, I realize it's hard to follow. That's why I gave you a handout.

Hopefully that helps a little. But Galerius, who was the Augustus in the East, appointed somebody to replace Severus in the West, since the Augustus position in the West was up for grabs, so to speak. Maxentius and Constantine both were rival candidates for the Augustus ship.

So it fell to Galerius in the East to appoint someone to replace Severus, and he appointed Licinius, who becomes significant later on. Maximian, who was the father of Maxentius, who was holed up in Rome, came out of retirement to try to support his son's bid, although Maximian didn't really want his son to be emperor. Actually, Maximian, in order to try to straighten things out, tried to become Augustus himself, too, eventually.

There was a lot of intrigue going on there, and I'm just trying to summarize it very quickly. It was a complex way in which Constantine came to power. But to make a long story short, Maxentius was holed up in Rome, saying he was the emperor and had most of the citizens of Rome going along with him.

Constantine had the armies in Gaul claiming he was the new emperor of the West, and so there was going to be a war between those two. In 312, Constantine brought the armies down against Rome from Gaul and descended on Rome and was encamped outside of Rome and had an interesting experience. This experience is one that each person will have to interpret the significance of for himself, because it's not entirely clear whether he had a vision from God or something else happened.

He certainly claimed it was a vision from God and may well have believed it. When he was encamped against Rome and not yet having attacked, he claims that he saw a vision in the sky, and in that vision he saw a cross, a Christian cross. Now, at this time Constantine was not a Christian.

He was a sun worshiper, and the cross was in the sky, and there were the Latin words over the cross that translated to mean, In this sign, conquer. And it seems the next day he awoke from his sleep and said he had another dream in addition to this vision where he had seen the symbols of the two Greek letters, Ki and Rho. Now, Ki and Rho look like an X and a P in our English character, and some of you may be familiar with this symbol, the Ki Rho.

It actually has another name in Latin terminology, but the Ki Rho symbol are the first two letters in the name Christos, the Greek name for Christ. So the Ki Rho, which looks like an X with a P whose stem goes right through the middle of the X and the P is above it, I'm sure that if you've seen that you know what I'm talking about. That became the

symbol that Constantine put on the shields of his soldiers, and he baptized all of his soldiers.

And so the whole army was baptized Christian. Constantine, interestingly enough, himself did not get baptized at that time, nor for a very long time afterwards. But having had this encouraging vision of a cross saying, In this sign, conquer, and having been told in a dream to put this Christian symbol, a new symbol really, on his shield, he was sure that the God of the Christians was on his side.

And even though actually he had the disadvantage in the battle because Maxentius had the fortress of Rome and had a larger troop than Constantine, Constantine actually marched ahead of his troops in a vulnerable position, carrying a banner with a Christian symbol on it. And Maxentius came out to meet him. And Maxentius' armies were crossing the Tiber River on the Milvian Bridge, and they were beaten by Constantine's troops.

A bloody fight took place, and Maxentius and thousands of his soldiers were thrown over the bridge and drowned in the Tiber. And so the victory was complete. Constantine was the unrivaled ruler of the Western Roman Empire, and he gave the credit to Jesus.

He gave the credit to the God of the Christians. Now, he did not actually join the Church at this time. It's interesting enough.

He certainly favored Christianity in all of his rule. He encouraged people to become Christians. But it is not true, as some people mistakenly think, that Constantine made Christianity the mandatory religion.

Some people mistakenly think that Constantine made it mandatory to become Christian. Now, that's getting a little too ahead of time. It did become mandatory to become a Christian about 80 years later, when another emperor, Theodosius, made an edict that made it necessary for people to profess Christianity or be persecuted as pagans.

But Constantine didn't do that. Constantine followed the policies more of his father. Remember, Constantine's mother was a Christian, but his father had not been a Christian, but had refused to persecute Christians.

He had refused to execute Christians when he was the Caesar in Gaul and in Britain and in Spain. That was the region that he ruled. And so he had picked up his tolerant tendencies from his father and his pro-Christian tendencies from his mother, no doubt.

And he may have even had a genuine experience, such as he described, of a vision and a dream. And so he favored Christianity, and he brought about tremendous changes. Now, by this time, through a series of circumstances too complex to go through right here, Licinius, who I mentioned earlier, whom Galerius had appointed to replace the dead Severus, whom Maxentius had killed.

Did I lose you there? To make a long story short, Licinius had become the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. Although he started out as a replacement of Severus in the West, through a series of campaigns against Maximinus, Licinius became the Eastern Augustus. So we have the Eastern emperor was Licinius, and the Western emperor now was Constantine.

And at first, these men were on reasonably friendly terms. In fact, one of the first things that Constantine did once he became emperor was he and Licinius got together in the town of Milan and issued the famous Edict of Milan. This was in the year 313.

And Constantine and Licinius agreed to extend a policy of toleration to the Christians. Diocletian had not too long earlier outlawed Christianity and had followed the policy of many Caesars before him in doing so. So Constantine and Licinius decided that throughout the empire, Christians would not be persecuted anymore.

They were now legal. Now, although Constantine is given the credit for that, he wasn't the first to do it. Interestingly enough, Galerius, who had been very hostile toward Christians and had in fact instigated Diocletian's persecution against Christians, Galerius, who had a Christian wife, had two years earlier in 311 also issued an edict.

This was before Constantine came to power, giving tolerance to Christians. Galerius' wife had pointed out to him that he could not conquer the god of the Christians and that he ought to come to terms with them. And so Galerius, though he never really converted as far as we know, he actually was the first to issue an edict of tolerance.

But Constantine and Licinius, after Constantine conquered Rome, then continued that policy and made it official at the Council of Milan where the Edict of Milan was issued. Later on, Licinius reneged on this, and in the Eastern Empire, Christians were persecuted again for a while under Licinius. But Constantine became the sole ruler of the whole empire, even over the East, in 324, which was, of course, about 12 years after he had come to power.

The reason that this happened is long and drawn out, but he basically had a series of wars with Licinius and beat him and had him killed. And so he killed Maxentius and he killed Licinius, both of whom were brother-in-laws of his, brothers-in-law, though I don't know that there was very much love between brothers-in-law. I'm not even sure there was very much love between husbands and wives in those royal marriages.

Many of them were political conveniences. And so with Licinius dead in the East and Maxentius dead in the West, Constantine had no rivals. He became ruler over the whole Roman Empire, thus reversing what Diocletian had set up of a divided empire.

There were still districts, but Constantine ruled over the whole thing. And that was in 324. And that meant that even the Christians in the East weren't persecuted anymore.

And that ended, officially, the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, at least by the emperors. They might have been persecuted by neighbors or by other parties, but they weren't persecuted by the emperors anymore. And that was a surprising, amazing turn of affairs for the Christian church.

And I don't want to pass over this lightly, because we have to recall that Christians had known persecution from the emperors on and off for two and a half centuries. That means that when the Christians in Constantine's day, before he granted toleration, when they were being persecuted by Diocletian, they just assumed persecution was something that is going to be permanent for the church until Jesus comes back. Their Christian ancestors, for 250 years, had known little peace and had known mostly persecution, more persecution than times of peace.

And imagine how startled they must have been when the emperor, for the first time in history, was a Christian. The emperor, by definition, was a pagan. But now the emperor was a Christian and declared he wouldn't persecute Christians anymore and no one else could either.

Of course, they might have felt that with the instability of the Roman Empire in the past, Constantine might die and be replaced by somebody who would persecute them again. Actually, it did happen. Not the next ruler after Constantine, but a few rulers down the line.

A guy named Julian the Apostate became emperor. And although he did not severely persecute Christians, he did try to institute paganism as an official religion in Rome. He died and his attempts failed.

And a later emperor, Theodosius, outlawed paganism altogether so that Rome became officially Christian again. And Julian the Apostate was the last of the so-called non-Christian emperors. Now, the Christian emperors weren't very good Christians sometimes, but they were professing Christians.

And that made all the difference in the world in government policy. And we in America have never really known religious persecution. I mean, not officially.

The government in America today has many in it who are not friendly toward Christianity or toward Christian principles, at least, and would like to silence Christians. Maybe they'd like to stamp us all out for all we know. It's hard to say what they want.

Some of the policies they have might seem as if persecution is not very far away from us now. But it would not be too amazing to us. We should certainly be happy, a happy circumstance, most of us think, but not too amazing.

If a man became a president of the United States who was a Christian, it wouldn't be the first time. There have been many presidents of the United States who have at least been

professing Christians and that there would be, in fact, our present president professes to be a Christian. A Southern Baptist, as a matter of fact.

I'm not sure many Southern Baptists would like to own him as one of their own. But we're so used to the government allowing Christianity or at least paying lip service to Christianity as a good religion. Even the bad guys in government would like to be thought of as Christians.

So we can hardly relate with the sense of shock that must have come upon the Christians in Rome after 250 years of persecution, where not just persecution where people thumb their nose at them, but people feeding them to lions and burning them at the stake and torturing them and arresting their bishops and torturing them to death unless they would deny the faith and making people bow down and say Caesar is Lord. I mean, all that was over, forever. And the church wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

You see, there's been this long war between two ideologies. The ideology of statist power in Rome, the pagan state, and the ideology of Christianity, the kingdom of God, the followers of another king, one Jesus. And as it turns out, it would appear that Jesus had won.

In fact, in his book, *The Story of Civilization*, Will Durant wrote about this period and said, quote, there's no greater drama in human record than the sight of a few Christians scorned or oppressed by a succession of emperors, bearing all trials with fierce tenacity, multiplying quietly, building order while their enemies created or generated chaos, fighting the sword with the word, brutality with hope, and at last defeating the strongest state that history has ever known. Caesar and Christ had met in the arena, and Christ had won. Now, that is how many historians write about it.

Christianity conquered the Roman Empire. Well, not really that Christianity did. If Constantine's conversion was genuine, then it was Christ who conquered Constantine because his professed conversion was based on a supernatural vision, which, if genuine, came from Christ.

It wasn't from the Christians. But then again, we do know that he had a Christian mother who had more than a little bit of influence on him before that time, although she had not led him to convert to Christianity, she was profoundly influential in his life. So we could say that the lives of the Christians had had an impact on him, and Christ himself may well have had an impact on him.

And so we could say, in a sense, Christ conquered Rome. But it's sort of a statement we'd have to look at as yes and no. In another way, Rome might have conquered Christianity, or paganism might have conquered Christianity at this time.

There's different ways of looking at it, and it's one of the most difficult times in church

history to really appraise from a Christian point of view, because many things changed after Constantine's conversion that have continued to color the mindset of Christianity ever since, things which arguably are not positive from the standpoint of the kingdom of God. But I say arguably because there are some who would say the very things that I think are negative, some people think they're not so negative. Let me say, first of all, some of the pro-Christian reforms that Constantine instituted when he came to power.

First of all, he restored the properties of the church that had been confiscated during Diocletian's persecution. They had never been returned. Although Diocletian was gone from power, the church had never had their properties returned.

So Constantine returned all the church properties that had been confiscated back to the church. Many of the churches that Diocletian had burned down and destroyed, Constantine rebuilt them. He gave money to some of the poorer congregations to help them get on their feet.

He also granted tax exemption for church property. Apparently there were property taxes enrolled at that time, but church properties were given tax exemption, sort of as we have it here now. He granted a military exemption for clergy so that they would not be drafted, although obviously not all Christians were granted that exemption, only the bishops and the presbyters.

He also gave the bishops of the churches the authority as judges in their dioceses, which means that they could do church discipline and the state would stand behind it. They were like government judges. And if the bishops, for example, would excommunicate somebody, the state would stand behind that.

It was like a judge in the court proclaiming some kind of penalty. So he elevated the bishops to having authority like that of the judges in the courts. At his mother's encouragement, that is Helena, he went to Palestine.

And as I understand it, his mother was prone to have visions too. And through visions she determined the exact site of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. And there was a church built there called the Church of the Nativity that Constantine built at his mother's encouragement.

And she also allegedly through inspiration found the exact spot where Jesus was buried and resurrected. And there was a church built there, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which is still there today. Both of those churches are still there today, built by Constantine in the early 4th century.

Those churches still stand in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem today. It's amazing to us because there's no buildings in America more than about 200 years old. If you even go to Europe and see a building that's a thousand years old, you think, my goodness, that's

five times as old as any building in the United States.

And when you go and find places in the ancient Roman Empire that were built in the 4th century, 1,600 years ago, and they're still standing there, still worship services there. I don't know, maybe it doesn't do anything for you, but I marvel at that. Although, I'm not sentimental about holy sites.

I just think it's an amazing thing, whether it was a church or some other building. Any building that's that old is just an amazing thing to me, having an American perspective. But those churches are still there, built by Constantine.

A couple of things he did later on, and we'll have more to say this probably in our next lecture, when we talk about the Council of Nicaea. Constantine actually called the Council of Nicaea in 325 to settle what we call the Arian heresy, or the Arian controversy. Arius was a person who was teaching a doctrine about Christ that is identical to the Jehovah's Witness doctrine on the subject of Christ and the Trinity.

And Arius was a very popular and influential teacher in the Empire. There were, of course, Trinitarian bishops who were debating with Arius, although Arius was very influential. And the Empire was somewhat divided.

The Christians weren't sure whether Arius was right or whether what we now call the Orthodox position was right. But Constantine was concerned about how these schisms in the Church might divide the Empire, and that would, of course, hurt him politically. So he called for a council of the leading bishops to meet in Nicaea.

And there they had the Nicæan Council, from which came the Nicæan Creed, where the views of Arius were condemned and Trinitarian views were declared Orthodox. Later on, Constantine, although he had issued an edict of tolerance, which was supposed to extend to all religions, including Christianity, he later revoked that freedom for heretical sects like Arian cults and so forth. So he didn't banish paganism altogether, but he didn't allow heretical Christianity to have freedom.

He destroyed the meeting places of some of the heretical sects after he helped to establish Orthodoxy. Now, those things certainly show that Constantine believed that Christianity was good. They certainly don't teach us or prove to us that Constantine was a true Christian in the sense that we think that word.

Not everybody who says he's a Christian is one. I hope you know that much. And Constantine actually never even allowed himself to be baptized until he was on his deathbed, which makes it clear he didn't want to make that full commitment any time during his lifetime.

He favored Christianity. He encouraged people to become Christians. He believed Christianity was good, but we don't really have any way of knowing, and I don't

personally have a conviction that he was truly a Christian himself.

And many of the things that he did that we regard to be favorable toward Christianity, in my opinion, were some of the problems, caused problems in the later church. Now, I'll say more about that in a moment. But his Christianity may have been more political than genuine.

Now, I don't want to say that his conversion outside the walls of Rome was an entirely political thing. Some people cynically say, well, Constantine knew that the people in Rome had been very impressed with the Christian witness for a very long time. In fact, there were a lot of Christian citizens in Rome, and that if he professed Christianity, he'd cause Maxentius' people in Rome to side with him, Constantine, because they were Christians, some of them.

And so, therefore, he just converted in order to get the political following to win that battle. But he did not win that battle through any such shift of loyalties on the part of the citizens of Rome. And it's not likely that he converted just for that reason, because if he had, he wouldn't have to favor Christianity after he became the Pope.

If his conversion was entirely a fake, then once he came to power, he could just say, okay, now I'm emperor, I can do what I want, and show no more favor toward Christianity anymore after that. So there was truly evidence that Constantine was favorably disposed toward Christianity, and maybe even regarded himself as a Christian. But, as I said, he did not get baptized.

Even when he had all of his troops baptized, he didn't get baptized himself until his death bed. Actually, just before his death, he took off his purple robes and put on the white robes of a baptism neophyte, and he was baptized, and he died in those robes. And if his heart was toward God, he may have gone to heaven.

But it's strange that he didn't bother to be baptized until late in life. Now, one of the reasons for that is that the Church was teaching in those days, and was teaching fairly early, even in the second century, that baptism washes away sins. And, of course, that's not taught in the Bible, but there are some verses that can be construed to say something like that, if you don't understand it properly, I think.

But many in the early Church believed that if you're baptized, it washes away sins, but only past sins. And there was tremendous controversy in the early Church about what could be done about serious sins committed after baptism. And many people thought that if you committed a serious sin after baptism, you couldn't be forgiven of it.

And so it became sort of a habit among many, when they began to be favorable to Christianity, to put off their baptism as late as possible, so that they'd have less likelihood, less risk of committing sins after baptism. And that might have been the way

Constantine was thinking, too. You know, he didn't want to go to hell, so he just waited and was baptized at the end of his life, so that he wouldn't commit any more sins after that.

That is probably part of his reasoning. But he did not, he was not ruthless at all against paganism. He did not root paganism out of the empire very quickly.

Only very gradually did he promote Christianity in the place of paganism. Now, this might have been politically expedient. Remember that even though Constantine had become a Christian, that doesn't mean that everybody in Rome favored Christianity.

There was deeply ingrained pagan convictions in the majority of Roman citizens. And many of them might revolt if he sought to force them to become Christians. And he did not do it very quickly.

He made the first day of the week a holiday. Now, you know the Christians had met on the first day of the week. In the Didache, an early church document, that first day of the week was called the Lord's Day.

In fact, Revelation chapter 1 also has a reference to the Lord's Day. It's not certain whether it's a reference to the first day of the week or not. But because Jesus rose on the first day of the week, it was a day that meant something special to Christians.

And Constantine made the first day of the week a national holiday. And called it Sunday. Before that, the Christians only called it the first day of the week.

He called it Sunday after what he called the venerable day of the sun. Remember, he was a sun worshiper. He worshipped Helios, the sun god.

And there's some evidence that he began to interpret Helios, the sun god, as the god of the Christian. And Jesus, in the literature that was written at that time, is frequently called the sun, S-U-N, of righteousness. That, of course, is a term from the Old Testament.

In Malachi chapter 4, Jesus is referred to as the sun of righteousness who would arise with healing in his wings. But that term for Jesus, the sun of righteousness, became a very popular term in speaking about him in the religious writings of the day. He also made December 25th the official birthday of Jesus.

Now, December 25th, prior to that, was already celebrated by the pagans as the birth of the sun. And so, Constantine declared that day to be the birthday of Jesus. And so, Christmas on December 25th was Constantine's invention.

When he later moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople, and I should point this out, Constantinople was the name that he gave to the major city in the Eastern Church,

which had been called Byzantium. And he named it after himself, Constantinople, and made it the new capital of the Roman Empire. But when he did dedicate Constantinople, he used both Christian and pagan rites of dedication.

And so, he wouldn't offend anybody. So, you can see he was not a thoroughgoing reformer. He was not trying to weed all forms of paganism out of the empire at all, even though he favored Christianity.

He didn't even remove the pagan images from the coins until about five years after he came to power. For five years, he ruled and still had coins in circulation with pagan gods' heads on them. And he eventually removed those.

He did, as well as restoring Christian places of worship that had been destroyed, he also restored pagan temples that had been destroyed. And there's some obscurity surrounding these events. It is known he executed his own son and his nephew and his second wife.

His reasons for doing so, I've read from two different sources, are simply unclear. It's not known whether he saw them as conspiring against him and therefore, you know, traitors, or whether it was because of them maybe favoring paganism. It's hard.

We just don't know. But it doesn't sound like a very Christian thing to do, to tell you the truth, to kill your son, your nephew, and your wife. And so, there are some reasons to wonder whether Constantine was a true Christian.

By the way, of course, I'm leaving out an awful lot. During his reign, he did a lot of fighting. After he, you know, came to power, he fought in many wars, including a number of wars against Licinius.

And he killed all his adversaries, even though he was professing favoritism toward Christianity. And so, we find in Constantine a strange mixture of Christian sympathies, but also maybe evidence of an unregenerate man. And that isn't too hard for us to imagine.

There's many people around us today that we know who have Christian sympathies, but we would dare say they're probably unregenerate. They've never been baptized. They don't go to church.

They don't live a Christian life. But they think well of Christianity. They think it's a good thing.

And Constantine was probably belonging to that class. Now, I want to talk for the rest of the time we have here about the legacy of Constantine for the church. When the church was at war with Rome, of course, we're not talking about a fighting war with weapons.

We're talking about an ideological war. It was a spiritual warfare. It was truth versus paganism.

Christians fought that war by laying their lives down, not by killing people, but by allowing their enemies to kill them without resistance. They fought that war by preaching the gospel. They fought that war in all the ways that Jesus did and that the apostles did.

But when Constantine came to power, they were no longer at war with Rome. As a matter of fact, the Roman emperor had said, you're right, Christianity is true. You won't have to fight me anymore.

There will be no more war between Rome and the Christian church. In fact, Rome will become the sponsor of the Christian church. It sort of put the church into an identity crisis, as you could well imagine.

For centuries, we were enemies with the government. Now the government's paying our way. Now the government's building our churches.

Now the emperor is calling for church councils to solve problems of theological controversies. Now the emperor is able to appoint bishops. I mean, the emperor was very intrusive into the affairs of the church, always in a way that he considered favorable, but still intrusive in a way that the emperor had no business being.

Christ didn't set up a church to be run by the political authorities, but that's essentially what it became. And not everything that Constantine inaugurated permeates the whole church today, but there are certain strands of the whole fabric of the modern church that were contributed, and they are significant ones. They were contributed by Constantine in his era.

I've got five things I've put down here in your notes that I think are some of the enduring consequences in the church of Constantine's alleged conversion. First of all, with Constantine's conversion, it became fashionable to be baptized as a Christian. The emperor was encouraging people to do it.

The emperor seemed to trust Christians more than other people, and therefore you're more likely to get a position from the emperor if you were a baptized member of the church and so forth. And for that reason, of course, many pagans just came into the church without real conversion. They just get themselves baptized because it was encouraged by the government, so that the church, which had formerly, in times of persecution, been populated only by people who were willing to lay down their lives for Jesus, and therefore people who were almost certainly really converted, in times of peace and prosperity and flattery from the government, the church swelled with people who were not in any case regenerate and certainly would never have laid down their lives for the gospel.

They knew, however, they'd never be called upon to do so again, and therefore whatever advantages there were to being a Christian could be had without any of the costs of discipleship. And so the church became, of course, flabby and infiltrated by people who were pagans. Now when I say infiltrated, I don't mean to say that these pagans were part of a conspiracy to corrupt the church.

The pagans, in most cases, probably didn't really understand what Christianity was. And, I mean, they just knew the emperor was encouraging this, and they thought, well, okay, these Christians, they were persecuted for a long time, now they're in favor, I guess I'll join them, whatever it takes. I guess you get this water thing happen to you, and then you're in there, okay.

And so the church became filled with baptized pagans, really. And that is something that has not changed, even to the present in lands where the church is at peace with the government. I'm not wishing for times when the church is not at peace with the government.

I'm not saying I wish we were being persecuted. I'm just saying we need to be aware of this consequence. In persecuted countries, which still exist today, and where the government is persecuting Christianity, it is likely you'll find a higher percentage of the people in the church true Christians.

And you won't find the ranks swelled with a bunch of pagans who are just pretending or think they're Christians and aren't. Now we live in a country where Christianity has been favored for a couple hundred years, and of course Christianity in this country and in Europe, where Christianity has been favored for even much longer, the churches are full of people who probably don't know the first thing about conversion. They might even think they're Christians, not fully understanding what it means to be a Christian.

They might be offended if you suggested, you know, maybe you're not really a Christian. But Christianity requires a changed heart, a total surrender of the self, a dying to self, a denial of self, and taking up a cross to follow Jesus. And there's many people in the churches who've never even dreamed of doing such a thing as that.

Never heard they were supposed to. And if they heard it, they didn't like the idea and never gave it another thought. But they stayed in the church.

And that's the case today. It's not Constantine's fault, but we can say that it is part of the legacy of Constantine. When the church became officially tolerated and recognized and encouraged by the government, it's one of those consequences that the church became less pure in terms of its membership.

Now, rather than blaming Constantine for that, because I don't think Constantine intended that to happen, I could blame the devil for that. I could say the devil used this

situation and got some advantages in it. But it really is the church's fault, of course.

The church, to a certain extent, should have applied more stringent tests to membership. If martyrdom was not the issue any longer, they should at least have had some sort of interview or some sort of catechism or some kind of screening process as soon as they began to suspect that people were joining the church who weren't really converted. But the church kind of fell prey to this.

And although I think it's the church's fault for succumbing to the flattery of the world, I'm not sure I want to be too harsh on the church that day because I think they were caught by surprise. What would we do? What if the government of the United States decided that it was going to banish all New Age and cults and paganism and make America an officially Christian country again? And say that all religions other than Christianity are going to be sort of persona non grata, and if you're going to be advanced in government, advanced in business, you should be a Christian. Wouldn't lots of Christians say, wow, praise God, look what God has done in our country.

The government is sponsoring Christianity. But we should be on our guard. Of course, that's not likely to happen, by the way, here.

But it would be so unexpected, for one thing. We would be delighted. It might be.

I mean, some of us would be cautious, but I'm sure a lot of Christians would be very delighted and wouldn't anticipate the danger. In fact, there are people today, those who are called Christian reconstructionists, who believe that one of the best things we can do is begin to enforce through legislative action. The country should begin to enforce Mosaic law and the following of Christian norms and so forth and basically they believe that every nation, this one included, needs to become a Christian commonwealth or a Christian nation, officially, and intolerant of all those things that the law of Moses was intolerant of.

I don't know that that would be helpful. I know that there are, even those who are not called Christian reconstructionists, still many people are in sympathy with that. There are Christians who would like to see laws that inhibit the rights of homosexuals, for example.

Now, frankly, I'm not for homosexuals. I should say I'm not for homosexuality. But I don't know that the Church's task is enhanced by making laws that keep people into a straight and narrow lifestyle.

I mean, there are laws needed to keep people from killing each other, for example. There needs to be some morality enforced by law. But when it gets down to the fine points of private activity, many of which God condemns and which Christians personally must condemn, I don't know that it would serve the purpose of Christianity to try to weed out these tares from the world with legal action.

Frankly, I think that the parable Jesus told of the wheat and the tares is very instructive on this matter. I mean, should we hope that the United States Congress and Senate will eventually pass laws to require everyone to behave just like a Christian? Would that be good for Christianity? Well, it would be good for society in one sense. It would be a more civil society, a safer place to raise children and these kinds of things.

And those very facts would make many Christians say, this is good. This is good. The schools are not going to be teaching against Christianity.

They're going to teach Christianity. I can send my children to school again. It's safe to have my kids watch TV again because all the lewdness and all the profanity and all the blasphemy has been weeded out of the media.

And now there's only Christian things on television. I mean, lots of people think that's just the most wonderful thing in the world. And I'm sure Christians felt very largely that way when Constantine made Christianity the respectable, the encouraged religion of the empire.

But, of course, the problem with that is when people begin to act like Christians, even if it's only because the law compels them to, it's often hard to know who is and who isn't. In fact, it's even hard for those who isn't to know whether they is or isn't because so many people just assume that Christianity is living a certain way. And when people begin to live that way, even though they don't realize they're just compelled by the law to do it, but society begins to act a certain way by consensus, then it's hard to tell, even for the sinner himself, whether he's a Christian or not.

And many people have a false sense of being Christian in a situation like that. That happened in Constantine's day. Christianity became fashionable, and many people who were not genuinely saved joined the church.

Now, someone might say, well, that's better than what we've got now. You know, we've got horrible things happening in our government right now and in our society. It is true there are horrible things happening.

And I myself would certainly like to see many of them improve in favor of a more Christian morality. But I'm just looking objectively at history. I'd say this, that if the government began to sponsor Christianity, it's been done.

It's been tried, you know. History shows that that was not necessarily good for Christianity. I mean, some people think it was still.

Some people look back and say, well, this is the greatest thing that ever happened up to that time in Christianity. I'm not so sure because the church became infiltrated with people who weren't even Christians, and there were other ramifications of that that were not good. A second consequence of this period was that there was a blurring of the

distinction between Christianity and paganism, so that pagan practices continue to be practiced in the name of Christianity, like, for example, Christmas on December 25th.

This was a pagan festival. The bringing of shrubbery into the house and decorating it and giving gifts and a lot of the stuff, a lot of the stuff that's associated with our present Christmas celebration, it all came out of paganism. And what happened is Constantine just baptized these pagan practices and said, now, from now on, these, we're not worshipping the sun leaders, we're worshipping Jesus when we do that.

Now, someone, there's two ways of looking at that, a positive and a negative. On one hand, I've known Christians say, well, that's not bad, that's good, because what it shows is that Christianity has conquered and subdued and co-opted those things that used to belong to the devil. I mean, here, what could be a greater symbol of the victory of Christianity but that a day and a ritual that used to be for the worship of pagan deities has now been conquered for Christ and now the ritual and the day are now in honor of Jesus.

I've known people who say, you know, that's a very positive thing. But there's another side of that and that is that when you begin to mix pagan practices with Christianity and put Christian labels on them, you begin to lose sight of what Christianity is and what paganism is. And that's why when God told the children of Israel when they were going to conquer the land of the Canaanites, do not learn the religious practices of the heathen.

He said, do not inquire how do these people worship their gods that we might worship Jehovah this way. The mixing of two religions is called syncretism. And this has been a problem.

It was a problem in Israel in the Old Testament time. They mixed Baal worship with worship of Jehovah. Aaron made a golden calf like they used to worship in Egypt and said, this is Jehovah now.

This is the God that brought you out of Egypt. It's Jehovah. But it wasn't Jehovah.

And God didn't think it was a good idea to syncretize Judaism with paganism. And I, although we don't have any scriptures written after the time of Constantine for God to tell us what he thinks about it, I dare say he probably has the same opinion about the syncretism of Christianity with paganism as he had about the syncretism of Judaism with paganism. And so there was a paganization of the church.

The church began to eventually have icons, which are statues. I mean, what the Old Testament would call idols and images came to be part of the worship of the church. Why? Well, pagans like those.

It attracts more pagans to the church. It arouses feelings of reverence among people

who don't really know God but who have pagan sympathies. Even the whole introduction of great cathedrals and basilicas and huge ornate churches, this was largely to accommodate the pagan tastes.

The Christians for most of their history had either met in homes or in the catacombs or in the woods or in other secret places because of persecution. During times when persecution had lapsed, there had been Christian meeting houses had been built, though it's probable they were not real ornate and real elaborate because the churches were not rich. But when Constantine came to power and started giving money to the church, the church could build buildings that competed with the pagan temples for ornamentation.

And they went to it with all their might and filled Europe and the East with cathedrals and basilicas that are tremendous monuments to the creativity of those who built them. But are they monuments to the glory of God? Well, it's a matter of opinion. But God said in the Old Testament and in the New that he does not dwell in temples made with hands.

And it seems to me that there was a confusing of the pagan idea of the gods being worshipped in these ornate temples. They got that idea mixed together with Christianity. So you've got ornate buildings, you've got icons in the churches, you've got pagan holidays baptized with Christian terminology so that the church was paganized.

Not all of that has been removed, by the way, from even Protestant churches. We think of the worst of these offenses. Usually we think of the Roman Catholic Church.

But there are churches that are not Roman Catholic that still put a lot of concern into the ornamentation of their buildings. They still have their adoption of pagan holidays. Halloween, for example.

Churches that celebrate Halloween. That's a good example, in fact, because Halloween was originally a pagan practice of the Druids, but eventually was baptized and called All-Hallowed Saints' Eve. It was actually the next day after Halloween that was the pagan holiday.

But because even in Christian Rome, the pagans were so devoted to this celebration, some pope or another decided that they'll call the night before that All-Hallowed Saints' Eve. And so they give it a Christian name. But it's just an excuse for celebrating the old pagan holiday.

And many evangelical churches have Halloween parties and haunted houses and all kinds of stuff on Halloween. So what Constantine brought in has not been fully removed from us, and it's not just found among the Roman Catholics. So this paganization of the church took place.

A third result of Constantine's conversion was the blurring of the distinction between the church and the state, so that the church came to be regulated and in some measure

overseen and controlled by the government. And the interests of the government were considered to be mixed with the interests of the state. Now, sometime after Constantine, during some of the abuses of one of his successors, Athanasius, asked, when did a judgment of the church receive its validity from the emperor? Now, to my mind it was a little bit hypocritical of Athanasius to ask this question.

He was implying that the church never needs the endorsement of the emperor. But Athanasius was the main advocate of Trinitarianism at the Nicene Council, which the emperor had called the council, and Athanasius was the winner of that. And Constantine had declared Athanasius' views the correct views and Arius' views the wrong views.

And Athanasius never complained about the emperor making that declaration. But later on, a later emperor was an Arian, and almost all Trinitarianism was banished from the empire. One of actually Constantine's sons was an Arian emperor, and he banished Athanasius, who had defended the trinity at the Nicene Council, and it was during that time that Athanasius said, Well, since when do we need the emperor's endorsement to validate a church pronouncement? Well, I guess people feel how they do about church and state, maybe depending on whether the state's on their side in a given controversy or not.

However, we should be able to look at it a little more objectively. Another guy in the time of Athanasius, Hoseus of Cordova, criticized Constantine's son Constantius, who was the Arian ruler, who banished Athanasius and Hoseus. Hoseus said, he actually said to the emperor, Do not intrude yourself into the church matters, nor give commands to us concerning them.

God has put into your hands the kingdom. To us he has entrusted the affairs of the church. It is written, Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

It's interesting how that statement of Jesus, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, have been used by both sides of the controversy on church and state. For example, if you, as a Christian out of conscience, oppose something that the government is doing, there's likely to be some Christian more compliant, more spineless than yourself, who will say, Well, we need to go along with the government because she said, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. But interestingly, Hoseus used the scripture just the opposite ways.

When he was resisting the government, he said, Jesus said, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. There's two separate domains there, God's church and Caesar's state. And so, after Constantine merged the church and the state, more or less, and that merger became more complete later on, there were a few thinkers in the church anyway who began to complain about it and say, This is not a good thing.

But they couldn't stop it. It had begun. With the emperor sponsoring the church and building the church, a trend had begun that would not ever be reversed fully.

And that was that Christians began to enjoy the sponsorship of the state, and therefore the fortunes of the state were the concerns of the church as well. Two of the things that grew out of this are the last two things on the list I gave you. One is that for the first time in Constantine's days, God's sanction was invoked upon political warfare.

Prior to Constantine, you would find some Christians in the Roman military, but they were opposed in their going in there by the official stance of the church. The church was opposed to Christians fighting in warfare. They believed that when Jesus said, You should love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you, and so forth, that this would preclude any legitimate physical, aggressive, hostile, mortal combat on the part of Christians, that Christians should be peacemakers, not war makers.

And this was, for better or worse, this was the position of the church officially up until the time of Constantine. And although there were some Christians known to have been in the army prior to Constantine, these would have been exceptions. Probably in most cases they were soldiers who became Christians while in the military and didn't leave, but the majority of Christians would not join the military.

It was one of the things the Romans didn't like about them. They thought they were not very patriotic Romans because they wouldn't fight for the country. That sounds very much like what the Mennonites faced at a much later date, not 1,200, 1,300 years later.

But the thing is, the merging of the church and the state makes it very difficult to see clearly the issues of war and peace from a Christian perspective. Now, when the emperor was persecuting the church, there was very little temptation for those in the church to interpret the emperor as their friend and as the one whose interests they should be out bearing arms to protect. But when the emperor was on their side, then supporting the emperor's power was in a sense bolstering the security of the church.

So that fighting the wars of Rome began to be viewed as fighting God's battles for the protection of Christianity. After all, even though the Roman Empire had become Christian, there were still barbarians out there that were not Christian. And eventually, not too long after the sign, a few centuries later, there were Muslims out there that weren't Christian.

And there were still just pagans in various other parts of the world, including in Rome still. And yet the emperor was on the side of the Christians, so to go out and fight under his banner. And after all, he had conquered by fighting under the sign of the cross and under the sign of Christ.

And think of how Christians would be confused by that. Well, we always thought it was

wrong to fight in war, but our God told Constantine to fight under the sign of the cross. What do we make of that? It certainly has turned out good for us.

We don't get persecuted and fed to the lions anymore. And the church got confused about that, and ever since then, the church has been confused about that. There were things easier to understand about our role before it got so easy with this merger with the government.

The affairs of Christ's kingdom are not linked directly to the fortunes of any government of man. Christ is another king, one Jesus. And his citizens are scattered throughout all lands on the planet.

And they are dispersed among many nations, which nations, by the way, regard them as their citizens. America regards me as a citizen, enough to give me a passport that says I'm a U.S. citizen. But the Bible says I'm a citizen of heaven, and I'm merely one of God's ambassadors here in America.

From the human point of view, I'm a citizen of America, but from God's point of view, I have a higher loyalty and a higher citizenship. And that kingdom of which I'm a part has subjects throughout all lands, including any lands that my country, America, might go to war against. And, you know, so if America would go to war against some other country, and I'm a Christian in America, and there's Christians in that other country, and I and they happen to be members of the same kingdom, and the highest loyalty we have is to Jesus Christ, and we're brothers and compatriots in the kingdom of God, and the only reason I'm called to fight them is because they were born in a different country than I was born in, which happens to be not God's kingdom.

I mean, there ceases to be any convincing argument why I should fight these battles, when I might even find myself fighting against God. I might even find myself fighting against my brothers and sisters and killing them. For what purpose? To support a nation, perhaps a nation I was born in, but for no other reason do I defend it, but I was born here.

If I had been born in another nation, I would as equally defend that nation against this nation. I mean, it is so self-centered. Patriotism and nationalism are akin to, in my opinion, school spirit and racism and a whole bunch of other things I don't agree with.

And the only reason I disagree with them is they're irrational. A black racist is a racist and thinks blacks are best because, well, because he's black. If he was white and a racist, he'd think that whites were best because, well, he's white.

I remember when I was in high school, even though I was a sophomore class president, I never could get into going to games and rooting for our team and going to the pep rallies and cheering for our school. Why? I mean, all these pep rallies, they say, we're the best,

we're greater than everyone else, our school, yay us, and songs about our school and stuff like that. What's so exciting about my school? I mean, if my parents had lived on the other side of town, I'd be going to this other school.

Would I be thinking it was the best just because I was there? Does my presence make it the best one? Maybe I'm the best. You see, that's where the whole idea of school spirit or racism comes from, is the assumption I'm the best, and whatever group I happen to be in is the best group, and I have to be loyal to it and feel great about it and get all excited about it, and you extend that to the nation you're born in or the ethnic group or whatever, and you've got nationalism and patriotism. Now, I want to say this.

Of all the nations of the world to be born in, I would rather have been born in America than any of the other options I know of, and it's been a good place to live. It's been a good place for Christians to live in many respects. I'm not anti-American.

I'm very thankful to God that of all the places I could have been born and raised and lived my life and raised my children, it was America and not Ethiopia or South Africa or India or Nepal or somewhere like that. I mean, people were born there, and I wasn't among them. I thank God for that, but that doesn't mean that I have some loyalty to this nation just because I haven't been born in it, even if it's the best nation in the world.

I'm not so sure it is continuing to be. Nations are not static entities. They grow and evolve and degenerate and change because populations change and governments change, and a lot of people get all teary-eyed and sentimental about the great nation America was and even is, but they're very alarmed about the way it's going.

Now, I guess what I'm saying is I'm in favor of goodness, and I'm in favor of justice, and I'm in favor of freedom, and basically so long as those things are part of the American nation, I'm going to consider that America is still one of the best places to live. But suppose, through circumstances not necessarily entirely unforeseeable, these virtues are not what America represents anymore. Suppose America represents officially anti-Christian ideas.

Am I under some obligation to still be a patriotic American because I haven't been born here? Hardly. You see, we are blinded by our freedom and by the favor we have from the government. We're blinded into an idea of nationalism, saying this is the best because it's the most enjoyable.

It's the most enviable place to live. It is therefore God's favorite. It is therefore my duty to promote it at all costs, even in war against its enemies.

Now, I don't intend in this talk to settle all the debate and questions about war, Christians and war. But I will say this. With the merger of church and state came the confusion of the ethics of warfare because Christians in the Roman Empire thought they

were fighting for a Christian Roman Empire, and they were fighting for God.

Eventually, when the Roman Empire dissolved into warring states and so forth, warfare continued between them, and everyone thought they were on God's side. Even in the last world war, the Germans thought they were on God's side, and we thought we were on God's side. I don't know what the Japanese thought.

I don't know if they even believe in God. They're Buddhists. But the thing is, ever since the time of Constantine, the majority of Christians in every land, no matter who they're fighting against, even if they're fighting against another allegedly Christian nation, they were sure that God was on their side and they ought to fight the battles of their nations.

And that is simply not realistic. It's not rational, and it's not agreeable with the way that the early church believed. And I personally think that the early church saw things more clearly because they were not tempted to look at the government as God's agency, as long as the government was persecuting them.

And when that changed, then it got a little less clear what the government was. Is it us or is it them? When Paul wrote about the state in Romans 13, there's a very clear us and them attitude there. You know, them.

We have to submit to them. We are citizens. They are them.

And we just got to, you know, God ordained them for one thing. He ordained us for something else. Paul said, what do I have to do to judge those who are outside the church? I judge those who are inside the church, those outside God judges.

And he went on to say that the state is the agency God ordained to judge the church. It was very clear, it was us and them. You know, they're the state, we're the church.

That's two separate things, sometimes coexisting in a tense sort of a truce, other times outright ideological warfare, even persecution. But when Constantine got converted, suddenly it wasn't so clear. Is the government us or is it them? It seems an awful lot like us.

And therefore the government's battles are our battles. And that is, I think, not a positive development in the clear thinking of the church. Finally, again the mixture of church and state led to the establishment and strengthening of the political power of the bishops.

Now Constantine, as I said, made the bishops of the churches actual judges, gave them the same authority as a court judge over their diocese. And that being the case, of course, we have the most flagrant violation of what Jesus said about the rulers of the Gentiles and the rulers of the church. Remember Jesus said, the rulers of the Gentiles exercise authority over them and lordship over them, but it shall not be so among you.

But as soon as the bishops of the church were made tantamount to the same thing as the rulers of the Gentiles, judges in the courts, then, of course, the rulers of the churches began to act like rulers of the Gentiles. And that hasn't changed since then either. The institutionalization of the church had started much earlier.

As we pointed out before, Ignatius, back at the turn of the first century, had advocated almost a shepherding type, almost a political type authority of the bishops. But during times of persecution and so forth, the bishops tended to be hunted down and killed a lot and they just never really got too arrogant. But in the days of Constantine, they did become arrogant.

They became powerful people and power corrupts people. It doesn't corrupt everyone. Jesus has all power and he isn't corrupted by it.

But political power is not a safe thing and Jesus never intended for his leaders of his church to have it. And because power corrupts, first of all, good men were probably, in some measure, corrupted by this power. But secondly, men who never were good in the first place coveted this power.

And since there were pagans in the church already, it was possible for pagans desiring this kind of power to go jump through the hoops, to go through the ranks, to become bishops of the churches, till it wasn't very long until you had totally unconverted men as bishops of many of the churches. Eventually, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, was an unconverted person and ruling the whole church. So that the church became a politically structured organization.

Partly in that it had secular political authority. The bishops had authority, it was sort of like a secular authority, but really their jurisdiction was just within the church for church discipline and so forth. But it still was a ruler of the Gentiles type of authority, so that the church leaders became more like bosses than like servants.

And even today, I don't care if you look at the Roman Catholic or any other church, look at any Protestant church, look at any Evangelical church, any Charismatic church, you're likely to find in more cases than not, leaders who think their position is a political one. They think that being a church leader is a privileged position, rather than a position of servanthood and slavery, like Jesus said it is, of total self-surrender to service to the people. So these are the legacy that I can see coming down to us through the ages, for the past 1700 years since Constantine.

These are, I think, 11. I think these are bad strains of sickness that got into the body of Christ, and it has never been totally eradicated. There have been many Reform movements attempted.

One of the most heroic was the Anabaptist movement, of course, where many martyrs

were made trying to just get back to doing it the way the Bible says to do it. But even they had blind spots. Everyone has blind spots.

I had my blind spots. Don't ask me what they are. I'm blind to them.

But everyone has blind spots. And the church has never fully recovered from the damage that was done. Next time, we'll be talking about the Arian heresy and the Council of Nicaea.

Of course, we'll still be talking about the period of Constantine, but we'll be looking at a totally different angle. So we'll stop there. And if you have any questions, we can take them at this time.

Yes, John?