

CHURCH HISTORY

Grace EPC, 2010

Taught by Caleb Stegall
785.597.9999 / cs@calebstegall.com

Primary Class Text: Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (2d ed. 1996)

The Church and the Empire: Diocletioan, Constantine, Theodosius

February 14, 2010

1. Diocletioan – 284-305
 - 1.1. Struggles of Rome
 - 1.2. Revival and final persecution

2. Constantine (280-337)
 - 2.1. “In this sign, conquer”
 - 2.2. Moving the capital of the Empire
 - 2.3. “Constantinianism” – Two views:
 - 2.31. John Howard Yoder: “Perhaps the most recurring theme in Yoder’s theology is his depiction and critique of “Constantinianism.” In short, Yoder argues that the history of Christianity must be read in light of a deep and lasting, though often subtle, shift that took place with respect to the relationship between church and world, and which he claims is best associated with the reign of Constantine. Whereas pre-Constantinian Christianity was that of a minority church existing in a world that was largely hostile toward it, Yoder claims that the Constantinian shift resulted in an alignment of the church with the ruling political regime of the day. In other words, Constantinianism represents a fusion of church and state, clergy and emperor, Bible and sword, God and civil authorities, or the general continuity of Christianity with the wider world. As Yoder himself describes it, the structure of Constantinianism is rooted in the “basic axiom” that “the true meaning of history, the true locus of salvation, is in the cosmos and not in the church. What God is really doing is being done primarily through the framework of society as a whole and not in the Christian community ... What is characteristic of all these strategies is that they compromise the lordship of Christ by identifying God’s cause in some way with the powers of the political establishment. Accordingly, Yoder calls for the church to resist such a Constantinian temptation by embodying the counter-establishment character and corresponding critical stance called for by the “politics of Jesus.” He maintains that it is only through its concrete presence as an alternative community that the church can truly serve as a witness to the world.” Huebner, *A Precarious Peace* (57-8)
 - 2.32. Phillip Gray: “[The Romans] knew of no civil order that was not maintained by soldiers.” This, Gray argues, makes it impossible for Yoder to straddle the divide between church and world as he’d like: “On the one hand, Yoder argues that the Christian community must be non-violent and non-conformist. On the other hand, he states that the church cannot be separated from the world, but must rather be a witness to it. This straddling relation of the church toward engagement with and difference from the world is possible under his erroneous exegesis, but if the distinction is unviable, it would appear that the church has only the choice of separatism. If, in the historical context of the Scriptures, the ‘sword’ meant the full force of the state, it appears that *no* element of it, juridical or otherwise, can be accepted by the Christian community. The necessary result, then, would be for the church to return to the catacombs, waiting in preparation for the next Diocletian persecution or for the End Times. Indeed, if the criticism of Yoder’s notion of force is sound, the only form of state that may potentially be acceptable would be the type of voluntary government proposed by Nozick, a type of state not likely to appear in the foreseeable future. Otherwise, any interaction the Christian community had with the state would lead to, by its nature, a temptation toward the Constantinian heresy.”

3. Theodosius and the Edict in 380: “It is Our Will that all the peoples We rule shall practice that religion which the divine Peter the Apostle transmitted to the Romans. We shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with divine judgment.”