

Lecture Two
 “God’s People and Civil Government after the Apostles”
 Sept. 21 - KTH

My previous lecture was a brief review of the relations of God’s People with civil government during the centuries covered by Biblical history. Biblical history concludes with the founding work of the Apostles which established the Christian church as the people of God during this last age.

During the time of apostolic labors there was no nation on earth committed to the true God. Even the Jewish nation as a vassal nation did not qualify since it had rejected the Messiah. Although a great number of the Jewish people, including many of the Levites and priests, had received Jesus as the Messiah; the rulers of the Jewish nation and the nation as a body rejected him. There was no civil government which ruled as the true minister of God. Rulers had the spirit of anti-Christ and to a greater or lesser degree were under the dominion of Satan.

The apostles and early Christians were, for the most part, members of the Jewish nation after the flesh. It was not easy for the Jewish Christians to cease confounding the People of God with the Jewish nation. However, led by the Spirit, the Apostles taught and gradually the New Testament church accepted that it was not necessary to be come a citizen of Israel in order to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

The life of the New Testament church began under the civil rule of the Roman emperors. These emperors claimed divinity. Along with temples erected to the many gods of the heathen, there were temples dedicated to the worship of the divine Caesar. Under these circumstances loyalty and obedience to the Roman government was tested and declared with an act of sacrifice at Caesar’s temple.

The confession, ‘Caesar is Lord’ was demanded. Caesar worship broke the first commandment and it was rejected by both the unbelieving Jew and Christians. However, several of the emperors had issued decrees which tolerated the scruples of the Jews. As long as the Jews lived peacefully and did not engage in sedition and rebellion, they were allowed to practice their monotheistic faith. For some time after the establishment of the New Testament Church, Roman authority did not distinguish between Jew and Christian and so Christians enjoyed the same toleration as unbelieving Jews.

The Christian doctrine that Jesus is the Messiah foretold and promised in Jewish Scripture caused a break between non-Christian Jews and Christian Jews. According to Christians, rejection of Christ is heresy. While faithful Jews were the beneficiaries and keepers of the true religion and the pillars of truth in the former age; rejection of Christ is apostasy from the true religion. At the same time the Jewish apostates argued that Christians were the true apostates. Jewish hatred of Christians was so great that they sometimes took violent measures against them. Civil disorder always caught the attention of the Romans who though tolerant of much, were adamant in their demand for public order. We observe this intolerance of disorder in the New Testament and in the early history of the Christian church. When parties formed within the Christian church they sometimes wickedly and violently fought one another. When these parties rioted in the streets, Roman authority responded.¹ In truth, no civil ruler can safely tolerate civil disorder.

In the time of Emperor Constantine, Christians had become so disorderly that he called the leaders of the parties together and ordered them to settle their differences. The result was the Nicene Creed. We thank God that this creed gave expression to the Biblical and orthodox Christian doctrine. But humanly speaking, the decision might have gone the other way. **When Christians resort to civil disorder in pursuance of**

¹e.g. riots prior to Nicea

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their beliefs, they invite intervention by the civil ruler in church affairs. The interventions may have results which have often been contrary to the Gospel witness and the purity of the church.

The enmity of the unbelieving Jews frequently led them to manipulate Roman rule against their Christian opponents. We see this at the crucifixion of Jesus. Not being allowed to carry out executions on their own authority, they sought the death of Jesus by the Roman hand. They managed this by the claim that Jesus was a rebel against Rome. Although Pilate knew better, he succumbed to their desire lest the Jews call in question Pilate’s loyalty to Caesar. This tactic was used repeatedly over the coming years. Christians were denounced as disorderly and rebellious; the enemies of Caesar. Once Christians were separated from the Jews in the Roman understanding and thus without protecting edicts of toleration; Rome demanded that Christians prove their loyalty by offering sacrifice at the imperial temples. Unlike the hypocritical Jews who when seeking the death of Jesus claimed to have no king but Caesar, Christians refused to say “Lord Caesar”. They insisted on confessing “Lord Jesus”. Thus those same Jews who claimed a strict monotheism and anathematized Christians as idolaters, were willing to make common cause with the heathen.

For their unyielding loyalty to and confession of Christ as Lord of all men, nations and rulers, Christians suffered and many died cruel deaths. **Thus we see how an apostate church will join with anti-Christian civil government to persecute the true and faithful Church of Christ.** This is dramatically brought to our attention in the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

The tactic of accusing Christians of disloyalty to the civil ruler in order to secure their persecution has been used by others than Jews. Over and over it has been used against Christ’s people. **They are vulnerable to the charge for a simple, easy to understand reason. Faithful Christians following the noble example of faithful Jews in previous times have always refused to give supreme allegiance to the civil ruler.** Civil rulers are under God; the Almighty Creator of the world whether they will confess it or not. God’s law is superior to human law. Just law is derived from God’s holy law. God’s faithful people in all ages have understood that they ought to obey God. If human rulers command anything contrary to the command of God, then rulers, no matter how great and powerful, must be disobeyed. If this disobedience results in hardship, prison and even death, these sufferings must be accepted as bearing the cross which is ours to bear. This understanding was clearly applied at the onset of the Christian age by the Apostles Peter and John. To the rulers of the Jews they said, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.”²

Today the Almighty power of God is vested in the Incarnate Son, our Redeemer. Immediately before the Ascension, Jesus said to his disciples, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”³ The law of God is under the administration of our Mediator, the Resurrected

Jesus, the Son of King David. He is King Jesus. Our confession is, “Lord Christ”. Thus Christians are the remonstrants and opponents of all

²Acts 4:19

³Matt. 28:18

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earthly governments claiming absolute authority. **Whether claims to absolute authority are made by civil or ecclesiastical rulers, Christians deny the claims and hold Christ supreme.** While we are instructed to live peaceful and orderly lives in the world; and while Jesus commands us to obey and pray for those who are set over us in God’s providence; we do not confess them as supreme powers or obey them in anything contrary to the commands of God. **Furthermore we teach and preach that civil rulers are the vassals of the Lord Jesus and are called to rule as his ministers following His law. This teaching frequently antagonizes the rulers of this world and results in persecution of the Christian church.**

“Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed you judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.”⁴ Whatever enmity this teaching may stir up against us, we must still teach it in a respectful yet bold way. It is part of our Great Commission from the King and Lord of all the earth.⁵

In due time after great and terrible persecution, Lord Jesus brought fruit from the faithful witness of His people. An abundant harvest was gathered. It began with the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christ. Constantine had much to learn about Christian life and Christian rule. Much of the past clung to him and he to it. But Constantine endeavored to be a Christian ruler. He turned for instruction to the leaders and teachers of the Christian church. Such a great ruler ruling in the fear of the true God had not been seen for a long time although it may be that Armenia was the first in the Christian era. Certainly it was almost a new thing. I say “almost” because likely there had been magistrates within the Roman Empire who had undertaken to rule as Christians.

Constantine and his Christian advisers have been vilified and condemned by many modern Christians as the spring of all the errors and abuses which have plagued the conduct of civil government since then. It is said that his attempt at Christian civil government became the pattern for systems which have corrupted the church since his time. Without doubt Constantine required more of the the grace of sanctification both in his personal life and his magisterial work but is this not case for every Christian. Both his government and the church were slow to learn the principles of Godly civil government under Christ. We are still learning the Christian political philosophy. Today the effort continues. There are advances and retreats. Philip Schaff whom I esteem among the most fair-minded and objective of the church historians wrote concerning Constantine, “Constantine adopted Christianity first as a superstition and put it by the side of his heathen superstition, till finally in his conviction the Christian vanquished the pagan, though without developing into a pure and enlightened faith.”⁶

As one would expect in a system of monarchial rule, Constantine’s personal development or lack of it was strongly reflected in his political

⁴Psalm 2: 10-12

⁵Matt. 28: 19&20

⁶Vol. III, page 14

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practice. We do well to remember that this was the beginning of a new era in the history of nations. The Roman Empire was the first Christian empire. There was little in the way of precedence to guide the Christian civil ruler. Yes, there was the Law of Moses given for the rule of Israel. The bishops who advised Constantine turned to this Law for their instructions to the Emperor. However the profound changes which the completion of Messiah’s work necessitated in the church also called for great changes in the administration of civil government. In some respects the bishops had as much to learn as Constantine. They also were learning. What does theocratic rule under Christ require as law today? The theonomic questions which Christians debate today were present then and often the answers are no better. In the centuries since, there has been an ebb and flow of opinion. At times there have been attempts to adopt the ancient code without or with little modification. At other times the Mosaic Law has been used as an illustration of the moral principles which must underlie Christian civil government. This is sometimes expressed by saying that the general equity of the moral law belongs in Christian civil law.

Many practices of civil government which began after the conversion of Constantine persist to this day. I realize that you are particularly desirous to learn about developments which took place in Scotland during the Protestant Reformation and the later Covenanter period. However, we need to understand that the debates, struggles, and solutions of that time were a continuation of debates, struggles, errors and failed solutions from a Christian past. The history of Scottish civil government and its relation to the church after the Reformation did not begin in a vacuum. It was not a new thing, but the reform of something with a very long history. Its leaders and developers were learned men, well aware of what had gone before during centuries of Christian experience. Like Constantine their minds were not entirely free of misconceptions rooted in the past.

I will skip much interesting detail in connection with Emperor Constantine and begin with the year 313. In that year in conjunction with Licinius, Constantine published an edict of religious toleration. The toleration was for all of the then existing religions in the Empire, heathen as well as Christian. At the same time Christian churches and property which had been seized by Diocletian were returned. Toleration was an enormous victory for Christians as it paved the way for victories to come. However we should not see it as something more than it was. This was a limited toleration. **The throne still retained the right to tolerate some but not necessarily all religions. The throne still exercised close supervision of all religious worship. As the edict itself read, it was proclaimed in order to secure peace and tranquillity in the Empire and to consolidate the popularity and power of the emperor.**

Note that Christianity did not become the religion of the state with publication of this edict. The edict bears some resemblance to modern secular constitutions of government as it attempts to remove religion as a political issue. To a considerable degree Constantine’s toleration was consistent with previous Roman policy in its recognition of many gods in its Pantheon. Upon condition of good behavior and loyalty to the emperor, persons were free to worship any one of them. At this point, Christ was also admitted to the House of gods so to speak.

Christians were no longer persecuted and in fact were increasingly favored. Constantine consulted the Christian bishops. He eliminated customs and laws offensive to Christians. He built churches and strengthened their legal right to receive and own property. He made Sunday a day of worship though not exclusively for Christian worship. The Lord’s Day was still called Sunday in honor of the sun god. However for Christians the name suggested the Son of God. We see the clever hand of the politician astute in public relations.

Nevertheless, pagans still outnumbered Christians in the Empire and there was wisdom in not provoking open revolt. However, the popular religious tide was running against the pagans. It was now safe to be a Christian and even socially and politically advantageous to be one. It is

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reported that in the City of Rome in 324 twelve thousand men with their families were baptized and that the emperor gave each convert a white robe and twenty gold coins. The story is probably not true or is greatly exaggerated, but it does suggest how times had changed.

Many say that the popularity of the Christian religion under Constantine was a disaster for the church. Yes, there were undesired side effects and many excesses, but to call it a disaster is foolish. Indeed, it is wicked to declare the deliverance and goodness of God an evil. Are we to pray for unpopularity and persecution? Of course not. We are pleased to see notable persons come to Christ and the removal of some of the prejudice against even hearing the Gospel. We know that prosperity has its dangers. God warned Israel of its perils. But persecution also has dangers and persecution is wicked. It is sadly true that in terrible times some deny their Lord leading the wicked to scoff and blaspheme.

The years after Constantine were not glorious for the reputation of Christians and Christian civil government. Although Constantine educated his sons as Christians they were not models of Christian life and rule. We are reminded of the sons of Eli, of Samuel, of David. Heathenism fought back. It continued to enjoy some of its ancient privileges especially in its stronghold, the City of Rome, but one by one those privileges were lost. In the century after Constantine, the Roman Empire gradually became at least formally and externally a Christian empire. Under Emperor Theodosius the First who died in 395, the practice of heathen religion was outlawed and paganism was nearly extinguished in the western parts of the Empire. Christianity was given all the advantages and privileges of a state religion previously enjoyed by paganism. Not only did Theodosius suppress heathenism, but Christian heresy as well. He adhered to the Nicene decision against Arius and aided its further strengthening at the Council of Chalcedon in 381. Rigid laws against all heretics and schismatics were issued. Like Constantine, Theodosius desired a unified, catholic church which would assist in uniting the Empire. Thus we see that precedents were established for the use of state power to enforce the doctrine of the favored Christian party. More than a thousand years later Christian civil rulers would still be following this ancient precedent. This practice was followed in a highly visible way during the religious controversies consequent to the Protestant Reformation.

The Goths under Alaric conquered and sacked Rome in 410. The heathen blamed the fall on Rome’s apostasy from the heathen gods. While worshiping these gods, Rome had conquered and ruled much of the world. Augustine of Hippo replied to this charge in his work “On the City of God”. He demonstrated that the fall was due to Roman abandonment of virtues which they had practiced when they were heathens. He went on to proclaim the victory of the church as the city of God. From the Fall of man to the present and on into the future he saw constant conflict between the city of man and the city of God. He envisioned no hope for the redemption or conversion of the city of man even to something approximating the city of God. As the historian Philip Schaff put it, “He hands the one city over to God, the other to demons.” Many today see things in essentially the same way. They have abandoned any effort to persuade societies and civil governments to confess Messiah the Prince and follow his law. On the other hand, the modern, liberal churches of the nineteenth century and the present, others have placed all their hope in the city of man and in worldly politics..

Anabaptists and pietists love to blame Constantine for the abuses which later plagued relations between church and state; between Christians and civil governments.

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Constantine’s policy of universal toleration while preferring Christianity and a civil society reformed according to its principles of morality seems closer to a Biblical political arrangement than the solutions of those Christian pluralists who support a radically secular political philosophy. Forgotten by many evangelicals today is what Christ and His church did for the betterment of lives for millions blessed by the leadership and reforms of Christian emperors. Forgotten are the inhumanity, injustice and cruelties of heathen Rome. Forgotten is the Rome which had relatively few free citizens with rights and privileges while masses of people were aliens and slaves; despised and having virtually no rights at all. Indeed, we may say that Rome fell because the masses would not longer fight for Rome.

Yes, as the successors of Constantine steadily strengthened the union of Christian church and Roman state many evils surfaced. **As the civil government assumed the work of building churches and supporting its ministers, the church lost its independence and became an agency of the civil government. It lost its voice of rebuke and instruction in respect to immoral rulers. As the citizen subject came to be recognized as a Christian because he was a citizen, the purity of the church rapidly deteriorated. As bishops became counselors of state and even civil officers, they were tempted and often succumbed to lusts for the luxuries, ease and prestige which power makes possible. More and more the church used the civil power of the sword to secure its goals. The preaching and teaching of the Gospel and the persuasion of men by the Spirit was neglected as more and more the civil government bribed and/or coerced a formal membership in the church without heart change or conversion of life.**

For a thousand years and more from Constantine to the Reformation the errors of the church in its relations with civil government became major causes of terrible corruption in both church and state. To this historical fact we must not blind ourselves. But neither should we blind ourselves to the great blessings for states and their citizens through the co-operation of church and civil government. When governors were committed to Christ, they were commonly more humane and just. When they were not they were commonly cruel and tyrannical.

“With the increasing union of the church and the state begins the long and tedious history of their collisions and their mutual struggle for the mastery. The state sought to subordinate the church to its temporal interests of king and emperor and the church to subject the state to its hierarchy. Both often transgressed the limits prescribed to their power in that word of the Lord: “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s. From the time of Constantine, therefore, the history of the church and that of the world in Europe are so closely interwoven, that neither one can be understood without the other.”⁷

There is one aspect of the union of church and state in Europe and the Near East from the time of Constantine onwards which requires our close attention. We must examine the persecutions which resulted from the state’s assumption of the government and discipline of the church.

As we have seen, the exercise of supreme religious authority was a long standing practice of Roman government. It sustained and governed the heathen system of worship. In the time of Constantine and for centuries before, Roman government in the person of the Caesar was totalitarian. That is to say, every aspect of life was ultimately under the supervision and authority of the emperor. From the time of Augustus,

⁷History Christian Church, P.Schaff, Vol.III, p. 181

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one of Caesar’s titles was *Pontifex Maximus*. The emperor was the high priest of the polytheistic heathen state religion of Rome. As the transition of the Roman Empire from heathenism to Christianity began under Constantine and became nearly complete under Theodosius the Great, the Christian emperors continued to rule as *Pontifex Maximus*. They held ultimate authority and controlled all religious institutions. Civil government remained superior to church government.⁸ Constantine and his successors exercised some what loose control over the church; others held a tighter grip.

Constantine said that as a Christian emperor he was appointed by God to serve as bishop over the external affairs of the church. The service of the ecclesiastical bishops⁹ was government of the internal affairs of the church. In Constantine’s distinction we discover the seed idea for development of a system of two episcopates for the church. Divine origin was claimed for both. **In this arrangement we observe a modification of the authority of the heathen *pontifex maximus*. We see that the claim of the Christian emperor is less extensive; less totalitarian than that of the heathen ruler. Two spheres of government for the church are proposed. In one the civil ruler is supreme. In the other the government of the church is supreme.¹⁰ But the actual separation of the spheres of authority and power is not as easily achieved in practice as the theoretical analysis makes it seem. Friction between civil government and ecclesiastical government over where the line between spheres should be drawn has troubled church/state relations before and since Constantine and will likely do so until the Lord’s return.** One thing is certain. No earthly organization of Christians, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or Anabaptist can avoid an answer to the question posed by a two spheres of government principle. The problem appears in Old and New Testaments in respect to Godly life under heathen governments and remains when states under their civil governments confess the Christian faith as the true religion.

Where is the line between the internal and external affairs of the Church? There are some things obviously in one sphere. When Christian parties in the church resort to physical conflict and riot, do we not all agree that the civil ruler has the right and duty to stop it? But does he have the authority to pro-actively prevent it? Would this not in all likelihood lead to an invasion of the authority of the church in respect to its doctrine and worship? External and internal spheres interpenetrate each other. Like mind and body they depend and influence each other. How can we separate them? Experience would suggest that it can not be done by exact and permanent definition. But experience also suggests that friendly co-operation and *concordats* between civil and ecclesiastical authorities can produce amiable, working relations.

Making a distinction between the internal and external affairs of the church is a sound starting place. **In general, from Constantine forward the basic rule was that God has given the government of the church authority over doctrine and worship. To these many would explicitly add control of membership and communion although this may be implied by the first two. The civil ruler has authority over**

⁸In Briton this arrangement is called *Erastianism*. The *Erastianism* of the Stewarts did not acknowledge two spheres. The king was lord over both. He was a true *Pontifex Maximus*.

⁹By the time of Constantine hierachal government was well established among most Christians.

¹⁰We are not at this time considering the limitations imposed by the Lordship of Christ on both governments.

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the remaining affairs. Working from this premise, sympathetic understanding and good will on the part of both parties can produce agreements which apply in specific circumstances. These agreements must not be regarded as written in stone. Agreements are not necessarily forever. If situations change or were misunderstood in the first place, agreements must change. If an agreement proves in practice to have been faulty in that it gives an improper jurisdiction to one party or the other, it must be adjusted. There must be a continual openness to further negotiation. Only when each party observes an honest concern for the God ordained sphere of the other can there be peace.

How did working from the premise of two spheres of church oversight work out from Constantine forward? Beyond doubt Constantine assumed a governmental oversight of the church which most modern Christians would have denied him. He summoned the Council of Nicea to settle a great doctrinal controversy in the church but we must acknowledge that he was provoked by sinful behavior on the part of Christians. He installed and deposed bishops. He went so far as to preach while as yet not even baptized. Later emperors presided at church councils and participated in them. Over time, the line between the external and internal affairs of the church was increasingly drawn through the precincts of internal affairs. On the other hand the bishops of the church increasingly participated in the affairs of the civil government and assumed an ever expanding role. The total effect was to leave the two sphere division as being more a theory than a practice.

One effect of the blurring of distinctions between the external and internal affairs of the church or as some have put it, between the temporal and the spiritual, was restrictions in the practice of religion and the rise of religious persecution under Christian emperors. While Constantine’s edict of toleration applied to all current religions within the empire, by the end of the century the practice of heathen religion was outlawed and the penalty could be death. Not only was public offering of heathen sacrifice and worship forbidden, but private practice as well. Furthermore the law of the emperor went beyond the extermination of heathen religion. It extended also to departures from catholic doctrine and practice. Heresy became not simply an offense resulting in a church sentence of excommunication. It became a civil crime punishable in various ways up to and including death. The church as such did not execute penalties other than excommunication. However, it hypocritically allowed and even encouraged and applauded the civil ruler when he executed those persons whom the church declared heretics. This practice continued through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation Period. It resulted in many executions of Protestants and a number of others as well, Catholics included. Theodosius the Great (d. 395) was the first to issue legislation against both the practice of heathen rites and Christian heresies.

However, such practices were not universally accepted in the church. Among its notable opponents were Ambrose of Milan and Martin of Tours. Chrysostom approved prohibition of heretical assemblies and confiscation of their churches, but not execution. Augustine appears to have wavered in his opinion. Early on he did not approve of state violence against heretics. Later, frustrated by the intransigence of the Donatist heretics, he began to say that there was some value in what he called “the rod” with the aim of bringing the offenders back to true doctrine. However, in actual cases he always asked the magistrates for clemency and humane treatment of the offenders.

We turn now to history after Roman Empire fell in the West. Rome was first occupied and pillaged in 410 by Alaric, a heretical Arian Christian. Wave after wave of barbarian invasions followed overrunning all Western Europe. Unified rule under Rome was ended. The situation was chaotic. Numbers of rival kingdoms contended for rule of Europe. The government of the church which was the only unified

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government for all of Europe. This government was also becoming increasingly centralized and monarchical under the Bishop of Rome. The Bishop of Rome began to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Roman Empire. Strong popes negotiated with barbarian chiefs. The popes began a grand project of converting pagan and heretical Arian chiefs to the catholic faith. Their method of doing so differed markedly from that of the Apostles and evangelists of the early church. Conversion of the masses one by one was, at least in the short run, bypassed in favor of converting the rulers of the barbarian tribes and nations. The rulers then followed the faith of the rulers. It might be called the “trickle down” method of evangelism. In this effort they enjoyed much success.

After the conversion of barbarian rulers many of their subjects followed as a matter of respect and obedience. They professed Christianity and were baptized, but they were largely, if not entirely, ignorant of the Christian faith. Heart change and conversion of life were not in evidence. The example of the early church which required extensive instruction and personal examination before baptism was not followed. Hundreds might be baptized on the command of their ruler. The converted rulers took as their models of Christian government, Christian emperors such as Constantine and Theodosius the Great. Thus church and state were confused and united. Both the benefits of Christian rule and errors of the Christian emperors were perpetuated. We should not neglect to mention the benefits. The Christian rulers established new codes of law drawing from elements of Roman law, barbarian traditions and customs, but most heavily from the canon law of the church. Thus the civil law of the land became an instruction in Christian life as well as the teaching in the churches which were established.

There is a notable difference between the time of the Christian emperors and the barbarian Christian kings. The distinction of two spheres of jurisdiction remained as before, but the balance of practical power was reversed. The emperors while theoretically limited to governance of the external affairs of the church often invaded its internal affairs. The responses of the church government often depended upon which party in the church was being favored or hurt. On the whole it is fair to say that the civil authority was dominant. After the rise of barbarian Christian kingdoms, the church exerted greater influence. There were several reasons for this. While civil power was distributed to a number of kings, the authority of the church had become more and more unified and universal in the person of the pope. The hierachal trend was approaching its papal summit. Furthermore, while the change in the Roman Empire from a heathen state to a Christian one had been a response to conversions and pressures from below, the changes among the barbarian nations were largely from the top down. They had been initiated by missions from the pope to the pagan kings. While there was a push and pull between kings and popes and sometimes rebellion throughout the Middle Ages, for the most part the popes remained dominant.

Most of church history during the Middle Ages must be passed over. In so far as the relations of the church, the people of God, to civil government are concerned, there is essentially nothing new to report. Throughout this period there was development of principles and trends already in place at the close of the imperial age. Church government had become an absolute monarchy in the person of the pope. Nevertheless, at the close of the Middle Ages the papacy as an institution was becoming increasingly impotent while at the same time it became greater in its own estimation and demands. The incompetence of many popes was a factor in its weakness, but even more debilitating was the greed, pride, worldliness and sexual immorality of many popes and the subordinate clergy. The church was wealthy beyond belief. For instance, in Scotland the church is reported to have owned as much as half of the agricultural lands and the rents it charged to its tenants were high. This fostered a resentment which encouraged the Protestant Reformation. But most of this wealth was tied to a feudal social and economic system which was disappearing for a variety of reasons. Wealth was being created and controlled by commerce and industry rather

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than through land ownership as in the feudal system. The church was slow to adjust.

It is doubtful that the Holy Roman Empire was ever fully what its name claimed. It was holy only in the sense that it was nominally and ideally Christian while the old Roman Empire was heathen. And only in a loose sense could it be called an empire. It never had the unity and political cohesiveness one associates with empire. As one historian has written, it was always more dream than reality. Even so for centuries it provided some political unity for Europe under the oversight of strong popes. However, even the dream was falling apart in the face of rising nationalism. The ascendant national kingdoms were governed by more or less absolute monarchs. Like the old Roman emperors who ruled as *pontifex maximus*, the kings sought to govern every activity in their domains including the religious. Nationalist kings were angry as they saw much of the wealth of their nations exported to Rome. They hated the fact that the clergy and wealth of the church was exempt from taxation. With the church owning so much, there was relatively little left to tax to finance the ambitions and wars of kings.

At the close of the Middle Ages the territory of Christendom was greatly dislocated from where it had been at the time of Constantine. Its main body had moved north and west into what had been pagan lands through the conversion of the barbarians. (Let me say at this point that though we speak of them as barbarians, they were in many respects less cruel, more humane than the Romans whose rule they ended.) Meanwhile, the Sword of Islam had subjugated the ancient territories of the church. The Moors were still in Spain. Moslems controlled North Africa and Western Asia, the homeland of the Christian faith. The Ottoman Turks having adopted the Islamic religion had captured Constantinople; had overrun Greece and the Balkans and were at the gates of Vienna. What remained of the Christian church in these territories was subject to rulers who tolerated Christians and Jews if they paid tribute and did not evangelize. The popes pleaded with the kings of Europe to unite and repel the invaders, but they paid little heed. They were too occupied with their own ambitions. Of the eastern church, only the Russian Orthodox remained free of Moslem domination. Being isolated by schism and geography, it had little connection with the western body of Christianity.

The mass of Europe’s people were ignorant of the Gospel, superstitious, unjustly exploited and abused by both the external and internal episcopates of the church. But things were stirring. There was restlessness and a spirit of rebellion about. It was and is called a *new birth*, a Renaissance. The Renaissance was a complex movement. There were many movements within the movement; wheels within wheels as it were. Prominent in the Renaissance was its humanism. In this humanism there were things welcome and things unwelcome; things helpful and things dangerous to the Christian faith.

Welcome was the turning away from monastic asceticism and contempt for the secular world. Welcome was the abandonment of a learning preoccupied with theology to the exclusion of mundane science, art and literature. Welcome was the realization that vocations other than the religious were honorable callings of God.

Unwelcome and dangerous was another aspect of Renaissance humanism. This was absorption with this world, what Augustine would have called the city of man, so that the city of God was forgotten. Some with justification have called it the revival of paganism. The revived paganism brought with it the pride, materialism, immorality and deification of men characteristic of its ancient heathen practice.

The welcome aspects of Renaissance humanism assisted the Great Protestant reformation of the church while the idolatrous aspects of

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humanism had to be fought and rejected. The Reformers were humanists but they were not heathen humanists.

As I conclude this lecture, I put this question, “Where was the People of God, the church, during these centuries?” It is difficult to identify that holy people, even approximately, with the papal system of the later Middle Ages and the people it held in superstitious subjection? And how can we identify it with any of the nations governed by ambitious, tyrannical monarchs? Where was it? The answer is that, like the Dispersion of old, it was a dispersed people. It had little visibility of organization. It was, it seems to me, more invisible than even the ancient Jewish church at the time of Christ.

But the People of God was still there. There were many Godly people seeking to follow Christ within the nominal fellowship of the Roman Church. It was found in all the Catholic nations of Europe. There were more than we sometimes imagine. And this is why we who are Reformed, speak of the reformation of the visible church. We do not think as anabaptists do entirely in terms of new churches. We do not throw away all the history of the church, all its accumulated and preserved wisdom, all its creeds and confessions. We do not take our Bibles in hand and start over. But we do take our Bibles in hand, and we examine all the traditions in the light of the Word of God. In this light we hold and reject; amend and strengthen all our doctrines. We stand on the shoulders of all the faithful martyrs and confessors of Jesus through the ages till Christ comes. Come Lord Jesus! **End**