

BOOK REVIEW

Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010). 373 pp. Pbk. US\$27.00.

Peter J. Leithart, pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Moscow, Idaho, and senior fellow at New Saint Andrews College, has provided a timely, witty and provocative criticism of contemporary assumptions about the Roman Emperor Constantine and the Constantinianism that followed his fourth-century conversion. His interest is both historical and theological, and he writes with four aims in view: provide a biography of Constantine, correct erroneous claims made by contemporary scholarship on Constantine, attack erroneous historical and theological assumptions regarding Constantinianism, and present Constantine as a model for Christian political practice.

The opening biographical chapters provide an insightful summary of the events that led to Constantine's conversion, as well as a passionate defence that his conversion was actually genuine. Leithart argues that Constantine was a 'seriously Christian ruler' (p. 82). He was 'flawed, no doubt; sometimes inconsistent with his stated ethic, certainly; an infant in faith. Yet a Christian' (p. 96). He did not force the Christian faith on his subjects, but his legislation did create an 'atmosphere' that encouraged conversion to Christianity, and a gradual end to Roman sacrificial practices.

Leithart's concern for doing history right will be appreciated especially by professional historians concerned with theologians who, regardless of the historical evidence, attempt to create a past that bolsters their present-day theological system. His primary targets throughout the book are the assumptions of John Howard Yoder and his 'increasing tribe' (p. 11), such as popular scholar Stanley Hauerwas. Leithart states that he does not want his book to be a 'Big Book of Quibbles' (p. 306) that merely points to the numerous errors of Yoder regarding Constantine, yet for almost three hundred pages it does just

that—much to the enjoyment of those who disagree with Yoder’s conclusions, and much to the chagrin of those who lean on Yoder for their post-Christendom diatribes against most of Christian history. In brief, Yoder was wrong about the pervasiveness of early church pacifism, wrong about Constantine’s control and manipulation of the church, wrong about everyone in the Empire after Constantine having to be a Christian, wrong about Christianity being de-Judaized in the century after Constantine, wrong about associating pogroms and anti-pagan violence with Constantinianism, wrong about the one thousand years after the fourth century; in fact, Yoder ‘misrepresents the fourth century’ and his answers to many of the questions surrounding its events are ‘misleading or outright false’ (p. 177). If, as Leithart claims, Yoder’s theology is so ‘deeply bound up with an account of Christian history’, then these manifold errors set ‘a question mark over his theology’ (p. 254).

Despite committing almost the entire book (thirteen of fourteen chapters) to pointing out the errors of Yoder *et al.* regarding the history and impact of Constantine, Leithart claims that his main interest is theological (p. 306). And while the one chapter committed to theology may be too cursory in places, Leithart’s contributions are significant. Leithart notes how the Empire was baptised into a faith that had no need for any sacrifices (of animals or people) in order to appease the Roman gods, for Jesus’ sacrifice was sufficient and non-repeatable. In other words, Constantine inaugurated in the fourth century what had been announced in the Gospels in the first century: the end of bondage to religious laws, rituals and sacrifices (Galatians 4; Hebrews 6). This was no mean achievement, for the course of Western civilization had been changed: ‘For millennia every empire, every city, every nation and tribe was organized around sacrifice. Every polity has been sacrificial polity. We are not, and we have Constantine to thank for that’ (p. 329).

However, the baptism of the Empire also serves as a metaphor for Christian political engagement. Baptism, Leithart claims, ‘sets a trajectory’ that offers a ‘foretaste of the final kingdom’ (p. 341). Baptism is a beginning, not an end, and like any infant baptised into the faith, Rome needed to grow in the faith and move from childhood to adolescence. The baptism metaphor assumes imperfection, sin and failure, yet also assumes that there is labour for Christians to bring about a growth

in justice and Christian living by applying Jesus' 'teaching and activity' (p. 338) to the political process.

For those well-meaning, but politically naïve, theologians who are enthused about the demise of Christendom, Leithart's closing comments about the move away from Constantinianism are a needed corrective. Post-Christian nations in the West are reassuming the role of sacrificers, but there are no gods to sacrifice to—except to themselves. Animals cannot be slaughtered, but there is still blood to be shed, and that blood is human. What will save us from an apocalypse is not a withdrawal into communities disengaged from society, but rather a re-evangelization of society and a renewed Constantinianism: 'An apocalypse can be averted only if modern civilization, like Rome, humbles itself and is willing to come forward to be baptized' (p. 342).

Gordon L. Heath
McMaster Divinity College