

Is Constantinianism all bad?

By [David Heim](#)

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"Constantinian" has lately been a favored pejorative in theological circles. The term--an allusion to the fourth-century Roman emperor whose conversion to Christianity turned a marginal sect into a state religion--has been used to deplore any alliance between the church and the state or, more broadly, between the church and the dominant political culture.

Thanks to the influence of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, among others, anti-Constantinianism has provided an edge of energy to much mainline preaching and theology and has fueled a healthy suspicion about ways that churches can lose their identity by aligning themselves with power or the mindset of modernity.

But is Constantinianism entirely wrongheaded? Don't Christians want people in power to embrace Christianity and Christian values? Is it a bad thing if they do? Is it impossible or meaningless for them to try?

Oliver O'Donovan in [*The Desire of the Nations*](#) offered, in direct conversation with Hauerwas, a learned defense of the idea of "Christendom," or Constantinianism. O'Donovan's writing is dense and his arguments elliptical, however, and my sense is that his book hasn't made much impact on the conversation, at least not outside graduate schools.

Peter Leithart's *Defending Constantine* has also deepened the discussion, both about what Constantine actually did and about the reputed perils of Constantinianism. That Hauerwas himself ([reviewing](#) the book for the *Century*) finds Leithart persuasive on a number of points suggests that battle between Constantinians and anti-Constantinians is not the black-and-white contest that popular theology often suggests it is.

The *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* has extended this important discussion with Timothy

Furry's [critical summary of Leithart](#) and [Leithart's reply](#). Furry, like Hauerwas, notes that the debate over Constantine involves both historical and theological issues, which can be distinguished, even if they can't be fully disentangled. Was the church pacifist before Constantine? Did Constantine's faith reshape the empire as well as revise the church? Does that matter for how we evaluate Constaninianism?

Leithart concludes that Christians can't reject out of hand the idea of a Christian civilization and a Christian political order--unless they believe that the world is impervious to the gospel.